



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Wise Foreign Relations
(*Christianity and Islam*,
pp. 28-35)

Suggested Article:

📖 Reading Locke
on the Tigris
(*Christianity and Islam*,
pp. 65-67)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Wise Foreign Relations

Men and women in the ancient Middle East were educated in the tradition of wisdom as a paradigm for conducting diplomacy. The Bible's much neglected wisdom tradition is a source of fresh possibilities in foreign policy vis à vis the Muslim world.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Kings 3:3-15

Responsive Reading (Psalm 72:1-5; 12-14)

Of Solomon [we sing]:

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.

**May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.**

May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.

**May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.**

May he live while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

**For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.**

He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.

**From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.**

Reflection

King Solomon began a ruthless opportunist, establishing his rule over Israel by murder (of his half-brother Adonijah and father's commander Joab) and exile (of the priest Abiathar), and keeping it with strategic foreign marriages and religious syncretism (1 Kings 2:12-3:2). With wonderfully ironic timing, the God of Israel invades the merciless, self-serving monarch's dream during his politically convenient jaunt to sacrifice at the "high place" of Gibeon. Solomon's turnaround leads him to worship before the ark of the covenant, repent through a fellowship offering, and throw a feast for all his servants (3:15). At the heart of his gift of wisdom is a newfound concern for the nation's wellbeing.

"We need to think outside the box," says Strohmer, to realize the biblical "wisdom tradition comprises a wealth of literature that invites us into the stories, intrigue, and policies surrounding the statesmen, diplomats, and foreign ministers of the ancient Middle East." This tradition approaches law, commerce, and statecraft through the "conditions that are universal to the entire human family, which places the literature at the service of humanity as a whole, *before* any distinctions are made between believers and those who would not consider themselves believers."

As Israel developed as a nation under David and Solomon, like other ancient nations it formed a professional class of "the wise," including *hakâmîm*, "high-ranking government officials...who



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specialized in matters of state and international relations," and *sôperîm*, "political secretaries and professional writers called scribes." These men and women were "tasked with developing geopolitical common ground on which to frame policies that are as just and good for all sides as possible."

Finding common ground is a crucial goal in the Middle East today, for as negotiator Rabbi Marc Gopin observes, "the ubiquitous human psychology of othering, the need to distinguish and exclude" remains the greatest obstacle facing diplomats there. Strohmer hopes that "moderate and progressive Islamic reformers would be receptive to the wisdom way, for it corresponds in part with the Islamic tradition of *ijtihad*, which is popularly translated 'independent thinking' or 'critical reasoning.'"

Study Questions

1. How does "the wisdom tradition within foreign policy [have] a family resemblance much closer to philosophy than to theology"? Why does Strohmer think Christian Zionism is out of step with the biblical wisdom tradition?
2. If we were to follow the wisdom way in the Middle East today, Strohmer suggests, we might embrace "Ezekiel's vision of a new holy land," which applies "a principle that resident aliens and native Israelites should be treated alike" (Ezekiel 47:22-23). How would this principle apply today?
3. Some might object that using the Bible as a source of ideas in foreign policy is inappropriate. Discuss Strohmer's response.
4. What experiences in Dohuk, Iraq, helped Mark Long break through his stereotypes of Muslim believers? Are similar experiences available to you?
5. In the context of "wise relations," discuss Mark Long's realization: "How often I have felt 'right' about my faith only by convincing others they were 'wrong' in theirs. How often I have done apologetics but forgotten to give grace, to declare through my life as well as my words the gospel of our Lord."

Departing Hymn: "Let There Be Light, Lord God of Hosts"

Let there be light, Lord God of hosts,
let there be wisdom on the earth;
let broad humanity have birth,
let there be deeds, instead of boasts.
Within our passionate hearts instill
the calm that ends all strain and strife;
make us your ministers of life;
purge us from lusts that curse and kill.

Give us the peace of vision clear
to see our brothers' good our own,
to joy and suffer not alone,
the love that casts away all fear.

Let woe and waste of warfare cease,
that useful labor yet may build
its homes with love and laughter filled;
God give your wayward children peace.

William M. Vories (1880-1964), altered

Suggested Tunes: HESPERUS or WINCHESTER NEW

Wise Foreign Relations

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore how Scripture describes the nature and role of the ancient wisdom tradition.
2. To discuss whether the biblical wisdom tradition can provide insight for diplomacy in the Middle East today.
3. To consider “the ubiquitous human psychology of othering” and how we might break through our stereotypes of Muslims.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christianity and Islam (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Let There Be Light, Lord God of Hosts” locate a tune, HESPERUS or WINCHESTER NEW, in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

“The great historic difficulty surrounding foreign relations, of course, is how to arrange and sustain geopolitical alignments and agreements among nations that frequently press their conflicting national interests and values against each other,” Charles Strohmer observes. “A geopolitical way of ‘getting along’ is necessary, a paradigm for the give-and-take of matters of state and foreign policy as these are lived out in the sometimes contentious, sometimes cataclysmic, and sometimes peaceable and prosperous relations between nations. In the biblical world, the wisdom tradition provided that way” (*Christianity and Islam*, p. 29).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Mention the current developments in the search for peace in Israel and the Palestinian lands. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that Israeli, Palestinian, and world leaders will grow in wisdom as they seek peace and the common good.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read I Kings 3:3-15 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The study explores Strohmer’s suggestion that the neglected biblical wisdom tradition can guide foreign policy decisions today, especially in the Middle East. The scripture reading gives some background for the view that Solomon had “a wise and discerning mind.” Members may discuss other “wise” men and women mentioned in Strohmer’s article, including the master scribes (*sôperîm*) like Baruch (Jeremiah 36) and the royal secretaries under David, Solomon, and Hezekiah (2 Samuel 20:25; 1 Kings 4:3; 2 Kings 18:37), as well as the diplomats (*hakâmîm*) who serve the Pharaoh (Exodus 7:11; cf. Isaiah 19:11-12) and Xerxes (Esther 1:13). The tradition of *hakâmîm* includes the wise women from the villages of Tekoa (2 Samuel 14) and Abel Beth Maacah (2 Samuel 20), and some women in the Canaanite court (Judges 5:29).

“The wise” serve their communities by seeking “to discover and to build on mutual ground ‘for all mankind,’” rather than promoting a narrow agenda. To broker a compromise between cities, tribes, or nations, diplomats must be inventive, teachable about the concerns of the other, and evenhanded in negotiating. They must overcome the “psychology of othering, the need to distinguish and exclude.” Encourage members to discuss Mark Long’s experiences in Dohuk, Iraq, in overcoming cultural stereotypes we have of Iraqis specifically and Muslims generally. Long takes a step toward being wise and overcoming the “othering” that stereotypes reinforce.

Study Questions

1. “Wisdom in its diplomatic role and theology in its dogmatic role would have quite different starting points and destinations,” says Strohmer. Wisdom, like philosophy, seeks starting points shared by all humankind or (at least) by all parties in the negotiations. Theology, on the other hand, uses the starting points “of a particular religious community and usually unites only those who believe its dogmas.” Strohmer criticizes Christian Zionism, which “holds that the modern nation of Israel has a divine right to all of the land promised to the people of Israel in the Old Testament,” for insisting on theological dogmas that are controversial, even among Christians (*Christianity and Islam*, p. 32).
Does this distinction between the wisdom tradition and theology mean that there is no opportunity for diplomats to rely on their religious commitments? Should theological beliefs influence a diplomat’s understanding of the situation or goals of diplomacy? Should they be used in the diplomat’s presentations and rationale for policies?
2. Ezekiel 47:22-23 says Israel may allot land to “the aliens who have settled among you and who have children.” This suggests the “foreigners” will have permanent settlements in the land. “Might not this redemptive principle guide the development of just policy in land issues such as the right of return of Palestinian refugees, the sovereignty of Jerusalem, and the borders of a two-state solution?” Strohmer suggests (*Christianity and Islam*, p. 34).
3. Strohmer considers three objections. (1) To the objection that ancient books like the Bible have no contemporary relevance, he replies that many ancient books (e.g., Plato’s *Republic* and Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*) provide wisdom for today. (2) To the objection that the Bible addresses only *personal* devotion, not *social* issues, he replies that the Bible provides guidance in “education, aesthetics, communications, politics” and other social disciplines, as well as foreign policy. (3) To the objection that using Scripture would violate the separation of church and state, he responds that the wisdom way “as the Bible understands it and as it functions under God – does not arise from the church or from religion as institutions” (*Christianity and Islam*, pp. 28-29).
4. Long is moved by the intelligence of the Kurdish professors and students. “As my new colleagues shared insights about natural law, intellectual property rights, limited government, and the political writings of Thomas Aquinas, their intellectual élan was hardly what I expected among a people once described as having ‘no friends but the mountains.’” He is also deeply moved by the religious piety of a law professor who invited him to share his time of prayer. Do members have similar opportunities for intellectual discussions and shared worship with Muslim friends? Are there opportunities to share work, meals, or family time?
5. While Long does not compromise his religious beliefs, he finds new application for Augustine’s teaching, “Every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is His Lord’s.” Being teachable in this way helps us overcome the temptation to stereotype and exclude the other.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.