Wisdom

A History

TREVOR CURNOW

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Published by Reaktion Books Ltd
33 Great Sutton Street
London EC1V 0DX, UK

www.reaktionbooks.co.uk

First published 2015

Page references in the Photo Acknowledgements and Index match the printed edition of this book.

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

eISBN: 9781780234854

Contents

Sapience. This engraving by the French artist Etienne Delaune depicts the personification of Wisdom, 1569. Although such personifications existed in classical art, this work was inspired by a very different tradition. The figure here, shown holding a book and gazing up to the heavens, has her origins in the biblical books of Proverbs and Sirach.

Introduction

Wisdom has fascinated the human race for thousands of years. Ancient authors sought to capture it in collections of proverbs and fables, while modern researchers seek to uncover its essence. It has been thought about in many different ways and looked for in many different places. It has been prized for its rarity, and its value has been proverbially compared to that of precious stones. Some have been reluctant to believe that it is within the grasp of humanity at all and have treated it as something essentially divine in nature. Even when it is accorded a lowlier status, there is still a considerable kudos attached to it. Historically, wisdom has been closely associated with the roles of counsellor, judge, healer, magician, diviner, poet, inventor and many others. While they might not necessarily be found in the ranks of a society's most powerful, most privileged or most wealthy, the wise may nevertheless be considered a kind of social elite. If they are not themselves to be found amongst the ranks of a society's shakers and movers, those who seek them out often are. While there may be some very arcane areas within the world of wisdom, many of them are surprisingly close to the world of everyday life. While some sages may seek a life of seclusion and contemplation in order to escape from material concerns, the same can scarcely be said about the person frequently referred to today as 'the sage of Omaha', the billionaire businessman Warren Buffett.

The aim of this book is to provide an introduction to the world of wisdom in its many different forms as it has manifested itself over the course of human history. In attempting this task I am confronted by two fundamental problems. First, the volume of materials from which I have had to make my selection is vast. Second, there is no single agreed definition as to what wisdom is. It may be helpful for me to say something here about how I have tried to address these problems in the chapters that follow. With regards to selection, my aim has been to try and present as wide a variety of materials as possible, and variety is better illustrated than explained. My selection is inevitably limited by my own knowledge and guided by my own interests, but within those

limits I have sought to represent as many periods, cultures and places as possible. Different chapters also seek to look at wisdom from different perspectives.

In any subject of significant size, the problem of selection is perhaps inevitable, but the problem of definition is not. However, anything that can be attributed to counsellors, judges, healers, magicians, diviners, poets, inventors and others is likely to be multifaceted or elusive or both. Whichever is the case, a single agreed definition of wisdom does not exist. A small selection of some of the options available may help to convey something of the nature of the problem. For example, Aristotle regarded wisdom as the knowledge of first principles.[1] A knowledge of these principles gives us a deep and fundamental understanding of how the world works. The idea that wisdom is connected with knowledge, especially knowledge of a special breadth or depth, is often encountered. On the other hand, Cicero took the view that wisdom was a healthy condition of the soul.[2] The idea that wisdom is related to psychological or spiritual health is also by no means uncommon. For St Augustine, wisdom was neither of these. Instead he identified it with piety, which involves the worship of and devotion to God.[3] Again, the idea that there is a religious dimension to wisdom is not unusual. It is important to note that the differences between Aristotle, Cicero and St Augustine are not about matters of detail; they are absolutely fundamental. And there are many other definitions of wisdom that could have been presented as examples.

Without an agreed definition, there is no agreed standard against which to judge what does or does not count as wisdom. There are two obvious ways of responding to this predicament. The first is to pick a particular definition of wisdom and stick to it, even though it is not favoured by all. The second is simply to accept at face value the claims of others that something is an example of wisdom. I have tried to take an approach that combines elements of both. In order to present as wide a variety of materials as possible, I have taken the view that if someone or something was widely thought to be wise somewhere sometime, then that fact has to be taken seriously. On the other hand, I have also used my own views of wisdom to shape the way in which those materials are selected and presented. What I have tried to do is achieve a balance between what wisdom means to me, and what it has meant to millions of people for thousands of years. Because I have not yet said what wisdom *does* mean to me, that is the next issue to be addressed.

My own view of wisdom is that it is principally about *people*. By this I mean that wisdom is above all manifested in and derives its source from wise people. Although this is not a universally held view, it is certainly not unique to me either. I believe this view lay behind a common practice in the ancient world of attributing wise sayings to

people with a reputation for wisdom, whether or not there was any evidence that they actually said them. King Solomon was credited with being the author of 3,000 proverbs. While this is not wholly impossible, there is no particular reason to believe it. It *is*, however, wholly *im*possible that he wrote the deuterocanonical book of the Bible known as the Book of Wisdom or the Wisdom of Solomon, which did not see the light of day until hundreds of years after his death. The work was not attributed to him by accident: its author planted massive clues in the text in order to encourage readers to come to that conclusion. By hiding behind the figure of Solomon, the later author hoped to secure greater credibility for the work. Throughout human history the wise saying seems to seek a wise person to which to attach itself. This was not a new practice even in the time of Solomon. An ancient Mesopotamian text known as 'The Instructions of Shuruppak to his son Ziusudra' attributes many wise sayings to the legendary King Shuruppak.[4] It is dated to around 2500 BC, more than a thousand years before Solomon was born.

But what is it that makes wise people wise? One of the themes that have emerged from recent research is a connection between wisdom and the ability to cope with whatever life throws at us. But what is it that *prevents* us from coping with life? In his classic study, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1956), Joseph Campbell wrote: 'every failure to cope with a life situation must be laid, in the end, to a restriction of consciousness.'[5] The idea that most of us are as good as sleepwalking most of the time can be found in many different spiritual traditions. A typical outcome of the heroic quest is some kind of awakening, as a result of which the hero sees the world in a new light. This new light is not only a *different* one, it is also a *better* one. The mystic, the shaman, the hero achieves a more profound understanding of the world and is therefore better able to deal with the world. In his *Republic*, Plato tells the famous story of the cave to illustrate this idea.[6] He imagines people chained up inside a cave in such a way that all they can see are shadows on its wall. These are cast by things that are outside the cave, but only those who manage to leave the cave and emerge into the light may discover that. What those in the cave think are real those outside know to be only shadows. Whether we take the connection between wisdom and perception in a metaphorical or a literal sense, it is a theme that is encountered at many different times in many different cultures. The wise are those who can see the bigger picture, whose horizons are broadest, whose vision is clearest, who live in the light. Because of this, throughout history people with a reputation for wisdom have been sought out for their advice.

Advice comes in all shapes and sizes, and a wise person is not necessarily the best one to go to for advice on how to build a boat, how to paint a fence or how to mend a shoe. The kind of advice that is associated with wisdom is less specialized, less technical. The skill

possessed by the wise person is the ability to live well, to make good decisions in life. This could mean an ability to 'cope', but that seems to me to be a minimal understanding of wisdom. Aristotle talked about the life that is lived well in terms of 'flourishing', which is a rather more elevated concept, while at the absolute top end of the spectrum we might encounter what Buddhists call 'enlightenment'. Unfortunately, in everyday life someone who gives me 'good advice' too often turns out to be someone who simply tells me what I want to hear. It is often difficult to decide who is and who is not a purveyor of sound advice, and this is a problem that pervades the study of wisdom. The pages of history are littered with stories of false prophets, heroes with feet of clay and supposed visionaries who turned out to have been looking in the wrong direction. The passage of time may help to separate the wheat from the chaff, and contemporary research is seeking to root the identification of wisdom in objective criteria, but we are a long way from arriving at a universally shared and scientifically based understanding of what wisdom is and how it can be recognized.

Because I believe that wisdom is principally about people, a lot of them will be found in the pages that follow. However, the study of wisdom is not only about people. In the case of the Wisdom of Solomon, we simply do not know who wrote it, but the association of this and many other pseudonymous or anonymous works with wisdom is too strong to be ignored. For those who believe that wisdom lies with the divine, the problem lies in gaining access to it. Here, people are largely secondary to practices such as divination in its many forms. Again there is a long-standing association of divination with wisdom that has to be respected. Consequently, while some chapters focus on some selected individuals, some are more thematic in their treatment, and others combine the two approaches.

The approach taken to the history of wisdom in this book is a kaleidoscopic one. Many facets of wisdom are explored and examined from a number of different thematic and historical angles. The arrangement of chapters is mainly meant to make the materials manageable, and the assignment of materials to one chapter or another is as much pragmatic as it is based on principle. The materials selected are wide-ranging, but not exhaustive. Inevitably, areas and periods with which I am more familiar have had an advantage in the selection process, and matters about which I have little or no knowledge have been at an obvious disadvantage.

Finally, a lot of words, especially names, from languages other than English appear in this book, bringing with them problems of transliteration. While I have tried to be consistent, I have not always succeeded. The correct has sometimes been sacrificed in favour of the familiar. For Chinese words and names, I have used Pinyin as a default position from which there have been occasional deviations. All biblical translations are from the *New English Bible* unless otherwise

indicated.

Fukurokuju. Ink sketch by the Japanese artist Kensai. Fukurokuju is one of the Seven Gods of Happiness of Japan, although his origins may be Chinese. He is associated with happiness, wealth and wisdom; he is also linked with longevity and always appears as an old man.

1
Wisdom, Gods and Goddesses

I shall begin this exploration of the world of wisdom with a visit to its highest realm, that of the divine. Many societies, cultures and religions have had their wise gods and goddesses. While some may belong to cults and religions that have long since disappeared from the face of the earth, others belong to religions that continue to attract millions of followers. These deities have come in many different shapes and sizes, and while they have all had *some* association with wisdom they have not necessarily all had the *same* association with it. They may be seen as exemplifying different aspects and different understandings of wisdom. Moreover, because of the durability of many cults and religions, associations may change over time. This may explain some of the apparent confusions and contradictions we see when we look back at the distant past. In the case of some cults and religions the distant past is very distant indeed. But I shall begin this survey in the much more recent past.

Hinduism

In the spring of 1982 I was walking along a road in northern India when I met a procession of young people coming in the opposite direction. As they went past me I was hit by a consignment of red powder. A passer-by helpfully explained that I had unwittingly become caught up in celebrations connected with the feast of the goddess Sarasvati. Sarasvati is a very ancient Indian deity who may have originated as a river goddess. Later she became recognized as the consort of Brahma, the creator god. While some consorts are little more than pale reflections of their partners, however, Sarasvati has a strong identity of her own. Among her many accomplishments, she is above all associated with wisdom and learning. This makes her particularly popular among students, who were the people who had covered me in powder. While the connection between students and wisdom is often a tenuous one, in India it is provided by Sarasvati.

Being associated with learning is not in itself enough to support a

reputation for wisdom, and the knowledgeable person is sometimes pointedly contrasted with the possessor of wisdom. Sarasvati, however, is credited with far more than just a wealth of knowledge; she is also regarded as the inventor of the Sanskrit language and the Devanagari script in which it is usually written. Language and literacy are generally regarded as two of the foundation stones of human civilization. Many societies attribute wisdom to those beings (whether divine, legendary or human) who are regarded as responsible for the basic inventions that make civilization possible, and Sarasvati is only the first illustration of this important fact.

It may be noted that as a species we label ourselves *Homo sapiens* (i.e. 'wise'), to distinguish ourselves from other similar species that historically failed to attain what we regard as civilization. If we are wise as a species because we are civilized, then the founders of civilization must possess a special wisdom. Although it may not be explicitly framed or articulated in this particular way, this basic thought seems to run throughout a lot of human history. The scope of civilization extends far beyond mere language and literacy, and so do the accomplishments of Sarasvati. Literature as well as literacy fall within her domain, especially poetry. She is also associated with music and is often depicted holding a lute.

Hinduism has many different gods, but undoubtedly one of the most popular of them is Ganesh, who is also associated with wisdom. He is very distinctive in appearance, having the head of an elephant atop a human body. His popularity derives in large part from the fact that he is believed to be a remover of obstacles and a bringer of success, so he is frequently invoked in everyday life. His connection with wisdom comes through his reputation as a patron of literature and learning. In this respect his domain overlaps that of Sarasvati. He is sometimes regarded as the scribe who wrote down the *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic, and in cultures where relatively few people are able to write, the position of the scribe is often associated with wisdom. The scribe is often a member of a social elite (distinguished by its education) and sometimes close to, or part of, the political elite. Is it too fanciful to see in Ganesh's ability to remove obstacles a semblance to the powerful official's ability to 'fix' things? Or, in his ability to put obstacles in the way of those who do not show him enough respect, a semblance of the lowly official angling for a bribe?

Ancient Egypt

A connection between the figure of the scribe and wisdom can also be found among the gods of ancient Egypt. Here the invention of writing was attributed to Thoth, who was regarded as the scribe of the gods. As such, one of his duties was to be the world's historian, the divine recorder of events. Because he was divine, his knowledge of history extended into the future as well as into the past. As a recorder, he was

believed to play a role in the judgement of the dead, and he is often depicted in representations of this process. This led to him being closely associated with the kind of life that people should live, a life that was characterized by honesty and integrity. People would declare that they had conducted their lives in a way that was 'straight and true like Thoth'.[1] He was credited with many kinds of different knowledge, and was privy to secrets shared by only a few. When required, he might serve the other gods as a counsellor or mediator. The Greeks came to identify him with their own god Hermes.

The goddess Isis was also associated with wisdom. The origins of her cult lie at least as far back in time as 2300 BC, and for centuries it remained very much an Egyptian affair. From around the third century BC onwards, however, her cult began to establish itself further afield and it became one of the most widespread and popular in the whole of the Roman Empire. The goddess came to be identified with many others in Europe and Asia, and various cults were absorbed into her own before it was driven out, or in some cases absorbed, by Christianity.

Of the goddesses who came to be identified with Isis in antiquity, some, such as the Roman Minerva, had some established connection with wisdom, but several others, such as the Greek Aphrodite, had a tenuous link, if any. Apart from all being female, they appear to have had little in common. The original link between Isis and wisdom seems to have been through her magical powers. As the cult developed and expanded it became increasingly associated with healing and oracular activities, both of which also often go hand in hand with wisdom. In due course, she was even credited with the invention of writing. Although Thoth had long been regarded as the creator of hieroglyphics, it seems that the association of writing with wisdom was so strong in the Egyptian outlook on the world that the wisest of goddesses had to have some connection with writing too.

The story of Isis continues to the present day. As one of the great goddesses of antiquity she has proven to be an inspiration to some working in the field of feminist spirituality. The ability of her cult to provide a home for others makes her an obvious goddess to represent the idea of the more generalized and greater 'Goddess'. As recently as 1976 a new 'Fellowship of Isis' was established in Ireland and it is not a coincidence that H. P. Blavatsky's first book on theosophy, published in 1877, was entitled *Isis Unveiled*.

Ancient Greece

The massive growth of the cult of Isis outside Egypt is remarkable because of the opposition it must have faced. The Graeco-Roman world into which it expanded was certainly not lacking in deities, and some of these were directly associated with wisdom. Perhaps the most important of these was Apollo. His reputation for wisdom rests in

large measure on the many oracles attached to his cult, including the most celebrated of them all at Delphi. However, he was also a healer, a function and profession that also has associations with wisdom in many cultures. Apollo was certainly not the only Greek god with oracular shrines, but he had a significant number of them, including some of the most important ones. Delphi became a kind of cult centre for wisdom in general as well as for Apollo in particular. The Seven Sages of Ancient Greece were said to have all met together there, although it is by no means certain that they ever did. Nevertheless, maxims attributed to them were inscribed on the walls of the temple, making it something of a shrine to wisdom as well as to Apollo.

Even philosophers like Socrates deferred to Delphi. When the oracle declared that no living person was wiser than him, Socrates did not dismiss this as nonsense but sought to understand what it meant. Doubting his own wisdom, he came to the conclusion that if he was the wisest person alive then human wisdom could not be worth much, and compared with divine wisdom it was worth nothing. Socrates was by no means the only person to think this. The idea that wisdom is somehow or ultimately divine in nature can be encountered in a number of different traditions. If it becomes an item of faith that *only* gods or goddesses can possess wisdom, then it follows that the only way for humans to approach wisdom is through some form of contact with the divine, whether direct or indirect. Turned around, the same item of faith would attribute to gods and goddesses anything regarded as embodying or closely associated with wisdom. This may be why Thoth was credited with the invention of hieroglyphics and Sarasvati with the invention of Devanagari.

Less well known than Apollo, but also associated with wisdom, was the goddess Metis. Indeed, ‘wisdom’ is one of the possible translations of her name. ‘Counsel’ is another one, reflecting the fact that the wise tend to be sought out for their advice. However, it is also possible to interpret it to mean something more akin to ‘cunning’, a term that carries rather more ambivalence with it. Where the wisdom of Thoth was associated with the morally exemplary life, cunningness can sometimes express itself in ways that are amoral if not actually immoral. If we think of wisdom as a purely positive thing, then we will naturally reject any attempts to portray it in a negative way, but wisdom and cunning are sometimes found together in ways that are difficult to disentangle.

As to Metis herself, not many stories are told about her, and she seems to be more of a personification than a person. Her principal claim to fame is that in some stories she appears as the mother of Athena, for whom she provides a suitable genealogy to associate her with wisdom. Like Thoth, Athena was recognized as a counsellor and mediator, although she was also a goddess of war when occasion arose. Although she seems to have had no oracles to channel it through, she passed on good advice directly to her favourites such as

Achilles and Odysseus. She was credited with either inventing or giving to the human race (or both) a number of skills and artefacts. The flute, the plough and the chariot were among her inventions, while weaving and spinning were some of the skills she taught to a grateful humanity. As such, she laid a number of the foundation stones of civilization.

Northern Europe

The old gods of northern Europe also had a variety of associations with wisdom. One of the best known of them was the Scandinavian god Odin. Like Athena, he definitely had a martial side. When he gave advice it was usually on military matters, and he was regarded as a master tactician. His reputation for wisdom may stem, at least in part, from the fact that attributes of an older Germanic god, Tiwaz, found their way into his cult. Tiwaz was very clearly associated with wisdom, along with law and justice. But Tiwaz too had a bellicose side to his nature, which was why the Romans identified him with their god Mars.

Two particular stories forge a strong link between Odin and wisdom. The first pits Odin against Vafthrudnir, a giant with a reputation for wisdom and knowledge. Odin visits him in disguise and a battle of wits ensues, which Odin wins. The notion of a 'wisdom contest' is far from unique to Norse legend. A famous example is provided by the story of the Sphinx, a creature that took up residence outside the Greek city of Thebes. The Sphinx asked passers-by a riddle, and ate those who failed to solve it. It was finally solved by Oedipus, whereupon (according to one version of the story) the Sphinx committed suicide. In folklore, a wisdom contest is often fought to the death, suggesting that these things could be taken very seriously. Because the answer to a riddle is not obvious, and requires more than just *knowledge*, riddles and wisdom are often found associated with each other. Finding the solution to a riddle of any difficulty typically requires an act of the imagination, an ability to think outside established or conventional patterns. The solution may not always require a lot of working out, but if the solution is obvious, it is not a riddle. Metaphorically speaking, solving a riddle is like cutting the Gordian knot. When Alexander the Great was presented with a knot no one could untie, he simply cut it in two with his sword.

The English word 'riddle' has the same origin as the old word 'rede', which means counsel or advice. Alternatively spelt as 'read', it is most often encountered now in the epithet attached to King Ethelred II of England, who was known as 'the Unready'. He was not lacking in preparation, but what he did lack was good advice. It may also be noted that the advice offered by the oracle of Apollo at Delphi was sometimes expressed in something akin to the form of a riddle. However it is to be explained and articulated, a connection between

riddles and advice has clearly existed in some cultures.

The second story linking Odin and wisdom involves Mimir, the guardian of a well whose waters brought wisdom to those who drank from them. Naturally he took advantage of this himself and so acquired a considerable reputation for wisdom. Odin was so desperate to drink from the well that he was prepared to sacrifice one of his eyes in order to do so. He got his wish. Later, after Mimir's death and decapitation, Odin kept his head and consulted it when he needed advice. There is a curious parallel to this in the story of Orpheus; it is said that after his killers threw his head into the sea, it washed up on the shores of the island of Lesbos. Those who found it put it in a cave where it functioned as an oracle.

Perhaps because of his general connection with the bloody battlefield, and with the halls of Valhalla where the fortunate slain were received, Odin was associated with the dead. In some stories told about him he takes on a positively shamanistic character, gaining access to knowledge that others are denied. He was also sometimes credited with the invention of runic writing, although this does not seem to have been a particularly strong tradition. As with Isis, it may be that Odin was given credit for inventing writing because of an already established reputation for wisdom. He also had a reputation for treachery, which might be regarded as an aspect of the darker side of cunning.

In Ireland, the invention of writing was attributed to Ogma, after whom the Ogham alphabet is named. Although scholars disagree as to where the alphabet actually originated, most of the surviving inscriptions do come from Ireland. Like Sarasvati, he was also a god of literature. His sister was Brigit, a goddess of divination, prophecy and healing (and blacksmiths). Between them they manifest a number of connections with wisdom that are plentifully evidenced elsewhere. Over the centuries elements of her cult became combined and confused with that of the Christian St Brigid, who is also known as St Bride. Like Brigit, St Brigid is also associated with healing (and blacksmiths). In some respects and places, the old gods are still with us.

Buddhism and Taoism

We have already seen several examples of gods and goddesses being credited with providing the foundations for civilization. The case of Manjusri is a little different. He may perhaps best be thought of as a divine personification of wisdom within Buddhism. The full picture, however, is far more complicated than that, and only some of the complications may be addressed here. It has already been seen that religions can be very adaptable, responding and adjusting to external influences in a variety of ways. As further evidence of this, according to one tradition, Manjusri was the consort of none other than Sarasvati.

Other traditions have him taking on human form in a variety of guises. If he is a personification, then he is certainly no abstraction. He is regarded as a protector of those who worship him, and may sometimes appear to them in dreams. Dreams are regarded as a vehicle for the transmission of divine wisdom in many cultures. Manjusri was also regarded as the patron of grammar, reflecting another way in which divine wisdom may be associated with language and literacy.

In China he is known as Wen Shu, and is usually depicted holding a sword, which is one of his weapons against ignorance. The other is the Buddhist text he carries with him, which contains teachings on wisdom. Tradition has it that he spent many years in China, although there is evidence that his cult had its origins in India. Where the story of Manjusri gets particularly interesting is in Nepal. Local legend has it that the Kathmandu valley was a lake until he used his sword to cut what is now known as the Chhobar Gorge in order to drain it. This made the occupation of the valley possible. A great stupa, known as Swayambhunath, commemorates this feat. Because the Kathmandu valley became the centre of Nepal, many Nepalese regard Manjusri as the effective founder of their nation. Such traditions make it clear that Manjusri is regarded as far more than a simple personification of wisdom. There is a biography as well as an iconography. The story of Chhobar Gorge marks an interesting and rare association of wisdom with what might be regarded as a work of civil engineering, however miraculous it might be.

In Japan, Manjusri is known as Monju, where he finds himself alongside different gods of wisdom such as Fukurokuju. Fukurokuju was probably originally a Chinese Taoist god, although he is also sometimes regarded as a Buddhist one. In one capacity or another he was clearly admitted to the Japanese pantheon. He is usually depicted as an old man with an elongated bald head and carrying a book. He is often accompanied by a crane, which is a symbol of long life in Japan. His name literally means ‘happiness-wealth-longevity’, reflecting what might be regarded as three very common human aspirations. He is frequently to be found in the company of six other deities, and together they are known as the *Shichi Fukojin*, a term usually translated as ‘Seven Gods of Happiness’ or ‘Seven Bringers of Good Fortune’. The deities themselves have a variety of origins and the stories told about them are confusing and contradictory. What is important is that they are seen to represent different dimensions of happiness and good fortune, such as prosperity and health, love and laughter. If we are known by the company we keep, then Fukurokuju’s choice of companions brings out an aspect of wisdom that has so far been little in evidence. In the example of Fukurokuju we can read the clear message that wisdom brings benefits. Far from being something abstract or esoteric or remote, wisdom is something that can improve the quality (and the duration) of our everyday lives. In the figure of Fukurokuju, divine wisdom puts on a very human face. And although

Christ. Still other representations of wisdom show a figure who is neither Christ nor an angel, but clearly female. Sometimes this figure wears a crown. It is widely accepted that the St Sophia who supposedly lived in the second century and had three saintly daughters called Faith, Hope and Charity is an invention, but all inventions have a purpose and hers seems to have been to play the role of Wisdom personified. Just like *hokma* in Hebrew, *sophia* is feminine in Greek. The only unambiguously female character in the immediate vicinity of the Christian trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, and some theologians have sought to bring her and Wisdom closer together, although this is to say the least pushing the bounds of orthodoxy.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Hebrew language of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New create a kind of linguistic pressure for an explicitly female figure of wisdom that is theologically problematic. But if wisdom were theologically unimportant, the simple solution would be to dispense with it, and this is not done. Indeed, some modern Russian theologians have been prepared to move wisdom even closer to the centre of the theological stage and risk the unorthodox consequences.

The Argument from Design

Before bringing this chapter to an end, I want to take a short detour away from particular gods and goddesses to consider the general question of whether we can prove that any god exists. The idea that the world bears the imprint of a wise creator has been frequently drawn upon in theology. There is a type of philosophical argument that works along the lines that the world is an incredibly impressive, complex thing, and it stretches credibility to believe that such a thing could just have happened by accident. This is known as the argument from design. There is a variation on it known as the argument from analogy. This says that just as something complex like a clock could not exist without a clockmaker, so something far more complex like the world could not exist without a creator. If someone presented us with, for example, an amazingly complex and perfectly executed piece of embroidery, we would simply not believe it if they told us that it just somehow happened to come into existence without anyone actually designing it or making it. The argument does not actually prove anything, but it invites us to consider the possibility that the existence of a creator is the least unlikely explanation of the world's existence.

However, this kind of approach can be taken a step further. If the *fact* of the world's existence is evidence for the *fact* of a creator's existence, then is the *nature* of the world evidence of the *nature* of its creator? And if *wisdom* can be found in the world does that mean that its creator was *wise*? The title of a book by John Ray, first published in 1691, clearly reveals his position on this particular point: *The Wisdom*

of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation. Ray summarizes his basic argument in this way:

> There is no greater, at least no more palpable and convincing Argument of the Existence of a Deity, than the admirable Art and Wisdom that discovers itself in the Make and Constitution, the Order and Disposition, the Ends and Uses of all the parts and Members of this stately Fabrick of Heaven and Earth …[4]

It may be noted that Ray's particular interest was in scientific classification and it was the *order* of the world that especially interested him. The order that scientists discovered in the world was a reflection and product of the wisdom of its creator.

This chapter has looked at a selection of deities associated in one way or another with wisdom. They have been taken from many different cultures and many different periods. Some belong to religions and cults that belong only to the distant past, some are very much part of the contemporary world. It is tempting to think that all cultures have had their gods or goddesses of wisdom, but there is not enough evidence to support such a claim. Of the cultures that do have gods or goddesses of wisdom, the evidence clearly demonstrates that they are not all the same. No one could plausibly claim that Ohrmazd and Odin came from the same mould. Even among those that might reasonably be regarded as simple personifications of wisdom, there is a significant difference between Metis and Manjusri. The differences are even more obvious in the cases of complex characters like Athena and Fukurokuju.

On the other hand, there cannot be *only* differences since all those discussed are *in some way* associated with wisdom, and when we look at the materials from this point of view it is possible to pick out significant similarities. A recurrent theme is the crucial contribution a particular deity made to civilization and culture. Sarasvati invented the Devanagari script, Thoth invented hieroglyphics, Ogma invented the Ogham alphabet and Odin invented runes. It is easy to see why a literate society would attach such importance to writing, given how much cultural currency tends to be based on it. Some of these were also more broadly associated with one or more genres of literature. Athena was recognized as the inventor of the plough and flute, among other things, making a distinct contribution to both agriculture and the arts.

All these inventions can be seen as examples of creativity. Ohrmazd, the Spirit of Wisdom, and the Judaic figure of Wisdom had more fundamental creative roles since they were involved in the creation of the world itself. Creativity is also involved in the kind of battle of wits that Odin won against Vafthrudnir, where an ability to

The Ascension of Enoch. Flemish print from the late 16th century based on a design by Maarten de Vos. It was believed that Enoch did not die but physically ascended to heaven, and this scene shows him taking leave of his friends and family.

depicted with wings and their heads were those of birds. This was another and more conventional way of representing messengers from the gods, because the gods were often thought to reside in the heavens. Sometimes they were conceived in human form, and become altogether more mundane

Most of the *apkallu* are little more than names, and different versions of these exist. One name stands out from the rest, however: that of Adapa (who is also sometimes known as Uan). He is always regarded as the first of them, and in some accounts he is credited with single-handedly bringing to the human race all the foundations of civilization. In some myths he appears as a human being created by Ea who is endowed with great wisdom and becomes his priest in Eridu, traditionally the first city to be established in Mesopotamia. The city was an important symbol of Mesopotamian civilization, and both Adapa in particular and the *apkallu* in general were associated with its invention. Eventually the age of the *apkallu* was brought to an end by a great flood. One myth says that this happened because the *apkallu* angered the gods in some way, although it is not clear what offence they committed.

The flood did not mark the end of the Mesopotamian mythology of wisdom. Ea made sure that the destruction of the world was not total by warning a man called Atrahasis of what was going to happen. Atrahasis (whose name literally means ‘extra-wise’) is also known as Ziusudra and Utnapishtim. As a result of the warning from Ea he built a large boat, which makes him an obvious Mesopotamian equivalent of Noah. Ziusudra was also said to be the son of Shuruppak, a legendary king of the Mesopotamian city of the same name with a reputation for wisdom in his own right. As such, many wise sayings and stories were attributed to him.[1]

Ancient China

Many ‘immortals’ populate the pages of Chinese legend. These are a special group of people who are thought to have achieved a state of human perfection. Sometimes these people are thought to have achieved immortality in the literal sense and found a way of eluding death altogether. Sometimes immortality is understood in a more mystical way and suggests a particularly high level of spiritual attainment. Sometimes the two are blended together, with a little magic occasionally added to the mixture. The important thing about all the immortals is that they all began as ordinary human beings, and so can be held up as exemplars to others. Because the immortals are regarded as the most illustrious of sages, they can be taken as exemplars of wisdom. Stories are told about many hundreds of immortals, but over the centuries a handful of them have been singled out for special attention and reverence. These are known as the Eight Immortals.

No one knows when the idea of a special group of eight immortals was first conceived, or why this particular eight were chosen for it. Whether historical or legendary, they are assigned to different periods and there is never any suggestion that they were ever all in the same place at the same time. Perhaps all that can be said is that in the popular imagination, at least, they represented the various aspects of wisdom in a tangible and memorable way, just as the Japanese Seven Gods of Happiness represented different kinds of good fortune. Their names sometimes appear slightly differently in different sources, but they are most commonly encountered as Li Tieguai, Zhang Guolao, Cao Guojiu, Han Xiangzi, Lü Dongbin, He Xiangu, Lan Caihe and Zhong Liquan. So many stories are told about them that only a flavour of them can be given here. Because Lü Dongbin is sometimes seen as the most important of the eight, and the one most often encountered as an individual rather than as a member of the group, I shall focus principally on him.

As with many special people in legend, the birth of Lü Dongbin was attended by strange phenomena, in his case a wonderful perfume and heavenly music. Again like many legendary figures, he was a prodigy and as a child was able to memorize vast amounts of poetry every day. This makes it unsurprising that he embarked upon a literary career, which occupied him for many years. Two themes dominate the transition to the next stage of his life. First, he is subjected to a number of ordeals, and secondly he meets two immortals. The stories reveal the kind of character he needs to develop in order to become worthy of immortality. He must be indifferent to material possessions, lacking in fear, immune to the temptations of the flesh, without personal ambition, and accepting of what life brings. Having passed all the tests and acquired from his teachers the secrets of invisibility and immortality, he spends hundreds of years wandering through China and performing beneficial deeds.

Lü Dongbin possessed a magic sword and accomplished some amazing feats. Other members of the eight also had impressive powers. Zhang Guolao had a magic donkey that could carry him vast distances in a day. When he had no use of the donkey he would fold it up and put it in his pocket. He Xiangu could fly and did not need to eat. Cao Guojiu could also go without food for long periods. More prosaically, Han Xiangzi and Zhong Liquan were both regarded as philosophers, Lan Caihe was a beggar who liked a drink, and Li Tieguai walked with the assistance of an iron crutch. Most of them lived as hermits at one time or another.

Many supernatural feats are scattered across the stories about the Eight Immortals, and clearly this is one way in which they can be identified as exceptional beings. Yet in other ways they are also very human. The tests to which Lü Dongbin was submitted, such as a death in the family or burglary, are ones that people without any supernatural powers have to deal with in everyday life. Even if it