

# Wise Foreign Relations

BY CHARLES STROHMER

**Scripture invites us into the stories of the diplomats and foreign ministers of the ancient Middle East—men and women educated in the tradition of wisdom as a paradigm for conducting diplomacy. Is the Bible’s much neglected wisdom tradition a source of fresh possibilities in U.S. foreign policy vis à vis the Muslim world?**

---

**R**easons for the severe downward spiral in international relations between the United States and the Muslim world have become the subject of dinner table conversation, bitter public debate, and academic wrangling. I will not reiterate these. What I hope to accomplish here is to start a conversation, setting out some provisional ideas to show that the Bible’s much neglected wisdom tradition can be a source of fresh possibilities in U.S. foreign policy vis à vis the Muslim world. Such an approach would not only ease tensions but also, and more importantly, help promote just policies in this conflicted region of the world.

Initially, three objections may arise to this approach to foreign policy. First, the Bible is an ancient book, people say, so how can it have any contemporary relevance? Political science classes today, however, still include works like Plato’s *Republic*; and Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*—the oldest military treatise in the world (fifth century, B.C.)—is required reading at military academies such as West Point and Annapolis. Antiquity, therefore, is not anathema to modern learning.

It is also assumed that the Bible cannot gain any traction on the political road because it speaks only to an individual’s personal devotion and moral instruction. This reductionist view fails to appreciate the Bible’s multi-aspected wisdom for life, such as for education, aesthetics, communications, politics, and, we shall see, for foreign policy.

Finally, the Bible as a source of ideas for U.S. foreign policy might be thought to violate separation of church and state. This is another common misunderstanding. As we shall see, “the wisdom way” in foreign policy—as the Bible understands it and as it functions under God—does not arise from the church or from religion as institutions.

#### **WHO WERE “THE WISE”?**

When we hear the word “wisdom” in reference to Scripture, we usually think of the Book of Proverbs and its clever sayings. But we need to think outside the box. Although proverbs are integral to the Bible’s wisdom tradition, they are only a part, and not the part emphasized here. The wisdom tradition comprises a wealth of literature that invites us into the stories, intrigue, and policies surrounding the diplomats and foreign ministers of the ancient Middle East. Those international actors were educated in the tradition of wisdom as a paradigm for conducting diplomacy, negotiations, and mediation of international relations, treaties, and settlements.

Of the many characteristics of wisdom literature, three indicate why it can function as a biblical paradigm for foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> It is connected with public affairs, especially with people in authority, such as in law, commerce, and statecraft; it has close associations with the non-Jewish world; and it focuses on 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. In other words, as Nietzsche might have said, it is for people who are human, all too human. Or as the writer of Ecclesiastes did say when summing up the concern of wisdom literature: this is “the whole duty of everyone” (12:13). Literally: this is [for] all mankind; or: this is [for] humanity as a whole.

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. 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.

Like all ancient nations, Israel, once it became a *nation*, had to develop its own wisdom paradigm for conducting international relations. That paradigm arose amid, and was partly drawn from, the reputed wisdom traditions of the time, such as were well-established in Egypt, Persia, Babylon, and elsewhere in the region.<sup>2</sup> Within Israel’s wisdom tradition, two of the more prominent classes of men and women were the *hakâmîm* and the *sôperîm*. *Hakâmîm* is from the Hebrew root *hkm*, for “wise” or “wisdom”; and occasionally the term “the wise” appears as shorthand for a list of

*hakâmîm*, often in political and geopolitical contexts.

Within the broad class called *hakâmîm* were high-ranking government officials—cabinet ministers, policy makers, foreign ministers, secretaries of state, diplomats, and suchlike—who specialized in matters of state and international relations. Functioning alongside were the *sôperîm*, a class that traditionally included political secretaries and professional writers called scribes. In the Old Testament the word often refers to a prominent leader's master scribe, or to a master secretary like Baruch (Jeremiah 36), or to a royal scribe or secretary (2 Samuel 20:25; 1 Kings 4:3; 2 Kings 18:37).<sup>3</sup> Included among the *sôperîm*, therefore, were ancient Israel's professional political writers, without whom, as with the *hakâmîm*, the nation would not have been able to function in matters of state and international relations. For example, when referring to Israel's political reorganization under David and Solomon, within the context of international negotiations and the council of kings, William McKane writes that the *sôperîm*, or scribes:

had to master foreign languages for the purposes of diplomacy, and that in doing so [they] acquired a knowledge of foreign literatures and assisted in their dissemination.... [In both] Egypt and Babylonia wisdom is located in the circle of a high establishment which plays an important role in the political and cultural life of the time and...these "scribes" have to be distinguished from mere writers. This seems to me to put the matter in the right perspective and it may not be going too far to say...that these men, although primarily statesmen and administrators, were "born middlemen in the international exchange of literature."<sup>4</sup>

Israel's *hakâmîm* and *sôperîm*, as well as the wise of surrounding nations, were therefore indispensable for running governments, fostering international relations, and advising rulers. Examples abound. When the Egyptian ruler makes Joseph prime minister, he acknowledges before all of his officials that they will never find anyone as wise (Genesis 41:33, 39). In an ominous crisis, a later Pharaoh summons *hakâmîm* along with sorcerers and magicians in hopes of thwarting a clear and present danger from a foreign power—represented by the miracle-working of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 7:11; cf. Isaiah 19:11-12). In the delicate matter of a legal decision that will decide Queen Vashti's fate, King Xerxes of Persia sends for the *hakâmîm* to advise him (Esther 1:13). Even some kings themselves were notable for having characteristics of the *hakâmîm*. David, for one, was praised for having "wisdom like the wisdom of the angel of God," and Solomon was known for his "wise and discerning" heart (2 Samuel 14:20; 1 Kings 3:12; see also Proverbs 20:26 in contrast to Ecclesiastes 4:13).

McKane writes that there is "a particular mental climate which is congenial to these *sôperîm* and *hakâmîm*; there are well-defined intellectual

attitudes which they cherish in connection with the maintenance of high professional standards.”<sup>5</sup> Women, too, are numbered among them. Second Samuel 14 describes a “wise woman” from Tekoa, whom Joab (David’s commander-in-chief) summoned to act out a dramatic scene before the king, which resulted in a later political decision by Absalom that had grave consequences for the government. Second Samuel 20 describes a “wise woman” in the besieged town of Abel Beth Maacah who successfully negotiated with Joab to prevent his army division from destroying her town. It is probable that both women were among a class of professional political negotiators, for only someone with the high level of diplomacy required in each crisis would have been chosen. Also, the remark that the woman went “in her wisdom” (2 Samuel 20:22, *κῆν*) is a kind of technical expression which “indicates that she was a recognized leader with professional standing, perhaps like the ‘wise women’ who were found in the Canaanite court, according to the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:29).”<sup>6</sup>

#### **THE DIPLOMAT’S APPROACH**

Foreign policy workers are tasked with developing geopolitical common ground on which to frame policies that are as just and good for all sides as possible. This can be extremely difficult, for there is no central government in international politics; the parties often come to the table, as the Middle Eastern conflict today witnesses, terribly alienated and without any trust in each other, and they may seek to remain that way. I agree with Middle East negotiator Rabbi Marc Gopin that perhaps the greatest obstacle to be overcome in the region is “the ubiquitous human psychology of othering, the need to distinguish and exclude.”<sup>7</sup>

Because they often must work within such a group psychology in hopes of reaching agreements, actors in international diplomacy—whether cabinet officials, ambassadors, or foreign ministers—need a style of approach and communication that is quite different from preaching, teaching, apologetics, or polemics. Their style must suit their function; like the carefully tuned strings of a classical instrument, tone and tradition must agree. (Imagine the disastrous outcomes if diplomats from different nations met in crises to vent polemics or to engage in religious apologetics.)

Foreign policy requires its professionals to exercise great tact and sensitivity in dealing with others. Take international negotiators as but one case in point. They must demonstrate a professionalism that submerges their

---

**The greatest obstacle to be overcome when framing policies that are as just and good for all sides as possible, is “the ubiquitous human psychology of othering, the need to distinguish and exclude.”**

---

own ideologies to the good of the negotiating parties. They must show themselves evenhanded, gaining the confidence of all sides, while helping the parties see reality as it is and adjust to it. They must help negotiations to reach midpoints that both sides can accept, often by challenging what seasoned Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross calls their “comfortable myths.” And they must be able to show empathy for the suffering and needs of the parties, helping each side “get” the other’s grievances. In short, the wise must be diplomatic.

We can see this general stance of the wise in Daniel’s long and distinguished political career. Even when he is battling severe persecution from his counterparts, Daniel seeks what is good for all—even for those political advisors called astrologers! In all cases Daniel seeks peaceful resolution to contradictory situations and predicaments. In this sense, the wise may be likened more to dialecticians than to apologists or polemicists. They have an esprit de corps that includes a clear respect of the “other,” even when the topics are very pointed, as the common phrase “O King, live forever” and similar phrases in the book indicate. This respectful form of address, used by the Chaldean advisors and the queen (Daniel 2:4, 3:9, 24; and 6:6), is embraced by Daniel and other Jewish officials (6:21 and 3:16-18).

Daniel’s performance is inspiring for Christians working in foreign affairs, for he is a believer serving in a pagan government through several different administrations, sometimes under the severest personal ordeals. Yet he remains faithful to Yahweh both in his personal religious convictions and in matters of policy even when ungodly compromise or expediency would have saved him from terrible personal grief. Yahweh vindicates Daniel’s faithfulness by giving him great favor in each administration.

Further, besides having its own style of communication, the wisdom tradition within foreign policy has a family resemblance much closer to philosophy than to theology. In fact, one meaning of “philosophy” is “love of wisdom” (in Greek, *philos* means love and *sophia* is wisdom). I don’t want to push this distinction between philosophy and theology into a dichotomy or to imply that neither discipline influences the other. But this needs to be understood: when confronted with foreign policy problems and international negotiations, wisdom in its diplomatic role and theology in its dogmatic role would have quite different starting points and destinations.

Whereas wisdom, according to Scripture, seeks to discover and build on mutual ground “for all mankind,” theology falls within the purview of a particular religious community and usually unites only those who believe its dogmas. Indeed, some theological views may even factionalize believers within a tradition, as well as make enemies among people of different religions. This is significant in the context of the Middle East, as it highlights the great category mistake made by the theology of Christian Zionism.<sup>8</sup>

I know that this conclusion will be strongly resisted in some quarters

because Christian Zionism seeks a huge influence upon U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, and because its promoters' hopes and fears about America are tied up with those of modern day Israel and America's attitude toward it. Nevertheless, Christian Zionism is out of step with the biblical wisdom tradition that functions as a paradigm for foreign policy and international relations.<sup>9</sup>

The wisdom way would not hurt Israel, and it would raise the legitimate claims of the Palestinians to equal footing with those of Israel. This would be a great boost to the peace process because the Palestinians see Christian Zionism as seeking to crush them through U.S. foreign policy.

Also, 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." *Ijtihad* as a way of reasoning and negotiating became marginalized within Islam during the twentieth century, but it is now being revived by Muslim reformers as a key to solving knotty problems faced by Muslim societies when interacting with the West. *Ijtihad*—because it is not limited to a fundamentalist (or as most commentators prefer to say, a political Islamic) reading of the Qur'an, the Hadith, and the Shari'a—can be an able negotiating partner in the Middle East with the wisdom way.<sup>10</sup>

The Bible's wisdom tradition has a mutuality with what the Qur'an calls *bani Adam*, or "the children of Adam," which the progressive Islamic scholar Omid Safi interprets as "the totality of humanity" (recall Ecclesiastes 12:13, above).<sup>11</sup> This is significant because it is Muslim reformers, not the political Islamists, who seek rapprochement and dialogue with Western nations and with whom those nations will find ways ahead. There is much uncharted common ground here, and Safi is typical of desires within the rising Muslim reform movement when he writes:

For progressive Muslims, a fundamental part of our struggle (*jihad*) to exorcise our inner demons and bring about justice in the world at large is to engage in a progressive and critical interpretation of Islam (*ijtihad*). An essential part of the progressive *ijtihad* is to account for and challenge the great impoverishment of thought and spirit brought forth by Muslim literalists-exclusivists.<sup>12</sup>

### **THE WISDOM WAY IN ACTION**

Here is one illustration of how the wisdom way might inform U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East. A central tenet of negotiations in any final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians is the formula "land for peace," which became a principle of UN Security resolution 242, in November, 1967, after the Six Day War: Israel would relinquish control of territories it had occupied in that war in return for recognition by the Arab world. In 1978, this principle was successfully used as the basis of

Israel's peace treaty with Egypt, and today it plays an essential role in the dismantling of Israeli settlements in Gaza and the West Bank. Foreign policy advisors seeking insight from Scripture in this matter have horizons available to them through Ezekiel's vision of a new holy land, which carries a provision in the spirit of jubilee.

Applying a principle that resident aliens and native Israelites should be treated alike, Ezekiel says Israel may allot land to "the aliens who have settled among you and who have children. You are to consider them as native-born Israelites; along with you they are to be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe the alien settles, there you are to give him his inheritance," declares the Sovereign LORD" (Ezekiel 47:22-23, NIV<sup>13</sup>; cf. Isaiah 14:1; Leviticus 19:33-34; 24:22).<sup>14</sup> The significant phrase "consider them as native-born Israelites" indicates that those receiving land do not have to meet a qualification of first being an Israelite. The dual reference to their history and progeny—"who have settled among you and who have children"—clarifies and strengthens the thought of settlements held well into the future by "foreigners," even as it precludes land-grabbing by non-Israelites seeking a temporary home or wanting to manipulate the housing market. So it reinforces the notion of *permanent* settlements.

Now this principle of treating Israelites and resident aliens alike, as established by Yahweh, is a gesture of common grace, which brings us full circle to the common ground principle within the wisdom tradition. With creative thinking from today's *hakâmîm* and *sôperîm*, 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? Indeed, a significant meaning of grace, as I understand it from the Hebrew word *chên*, is "moving people to places of well-being."<sup>15</sup> Would not the outworking of this principle in "land for peace" issues be an authentic gesture of grace to the Palestinians and have a redemptive effect on the psychology of exclusionary "othering"?

## **CONCLUSION**

Much remains to be discovered as we search the biblical wisdom tradition for insight to craft morally just U.S. foreign policy goals and decisions concerning the Middle East today. The death of Yasser Arafat and landslide election victory of the moderate Mahmoud Abbas (aka Abu Mazen) as Palestinian President have opened an unexplored landscape of possibilities for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, but the situation remains explosive. President George Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair pledge earnest and renewed efforts to move the "road map for peace" along, as do Ariel Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas. Egypt and Jordan, which have peace treaties with Israel, are weighing in with strong support, but militants from Iran or Syria may try to re-ignite the violence. Who knows what will happen? Nevertheless, this is a time for cautious optimism.

The stakes are high and “the wise” are needed to influence the outcome. Today’s *hakâmîm* and *sôperîm* face great challenges, but their efforts are just; if they succeed, the fruit will be peaceable, the future brighter.

## NOTES

1 These ideas are developed in John Peck and Charles Strohmer, *Uncommon Sense: God’s Wisdom for Our Complex and Changing World* (London: S.P.C.K., 2001), 31-45.

2 See, for example, Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986); Leo G. Perdue, et al., eds., *In Search of Wisdom: Essays in Memory of John G. Gammie* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993); and William McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1965).

3 Willem A. VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, volume 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 1289.

4 *Prophets and Wise Men*, 43-44.

5 *Ibid.*, 46

6 Bernard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 492.

7 Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58.

8 Christian Zionism 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. A maximalist interpretation insists that this geography extends from Egypt to Iraq (following a literal application of Genesis 15:18, which describes boundaries from the Nile to the Euphrates). A minimalist version includes the Gaza strip, the West Bank, and Jordan.

9 For instance, Christian Zionism is out of step with agreed upon international foreign policy in the region, including Israel’s peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, the American and British goal of creating a Palestinian state, and the Sharon government’s dismantling of settlements in Gaza.

10 “Hadith” refers to a narrative about the habits and religious practice of the Prophet Muhammad. “Shari’a” is the name for a consensus system of law and guidance derived from the Qur’an that emerged among Islamic legal scholars in the eighth and ninth centuries.

11 Omid Safi, ed., *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 12.

12 *Ibid.*, 8.

13 Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

14 I wish to thank Calvin Seerveld for pointing me to Ezekiel 47:21-23 in this context.

15 See my *Explaining the Grace of God* (Tonbridge, United Kingdom: Sovereign World, Ltd., 1993), 10-12.

---

## CHARLES STROHMER

*is the author of seven books and is currently at work on a book about U.S. foreign policy and the Muslim world.*