

Honoring the Wise

Wisdom in Scripture, Ministry, and Life;
Celebrating Lindsay Wilson's Thirty Years at Ridley

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Judges 19 as Wisdom

Sitting with the Wise in Ambivalence and Discontinuity

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OF ALL THE HORRORS told in Judges, it is chapter 19 and the rape and murder of an innocent woman while her husband sleeps soundly inside that raises perhaps the most unsettling questions for interpreters. It marks the beginning of the end of a process we have been watching with increasing discomfort since the opening of Judges; the threat of the Canaanite “other” has gradually been displaced by an even more terrifying darkness *within*. That the Levite and his wife meet such a fate in Benjamin—having chosen, in a terrible moment of irony, not to lodge in a Canaanite town—shows that the “Canaanization”¹ of Israel is complete.

Genre-wise, there are many ways that we could take this story: as straight historical narration of an unhappy period; as prophetic commentary on pre-monarchical Israel; or perhaps even as a kind of ancient horror film, designed to shock the audience with the monsters within. The theme of this Festschrift, however, suggests a different—and, I think, productive—lens. In his provocative 2019 *Obituary for Wisdom Literature*, Will Kynes dares us to abandon the hard-edged nineteenth-century critical category of wisdom text, freeing us to see wisdom’s intertextual connections with

1. Block, *Judges*, 58.

the entire canon.² Lindsay Wilson, never one to put dead Germans above Scripture, needed no such encouragement. His 2004 book *Joseph, Wise and Otherwise*, based on his doctoral thesis, brings out elements in Genesis 37–50 that suggest a “wisdom ‘family resemblance.’”³ My reading, while slightly different in method, is inspired by Wilson’s approach.⁴

My point of departure is modern genre theory’s observation that texts do not “belong” to a single genre but have relationships with many genres.⁵ Readers use genres heuristically, forming a genre hypothesis and testing “alternative readings of the text as different genres.”⁶ In part one, I test a reading of Judges 19 as if it were a wisdom text. What features stand out when we understand the chapter as something akin to Proverbs, Job, or Ecclesiastes? In part two, I explore how the wisdom genre helps us reconceive the discontinuities of the story—particularly in the disturbing bargain with the sons of Belial—as features, not flaws. Every genre requires something different from us as readers, and reading Judges 19 as a wisdom text demands that we sit with its discontinuities for longer than we might otherwise be comfortable. By refusing flat characterisation and trite moralizing, the text forces us live with ambivalence—which is where wisdom is often to be found.

Reading Judges 19 as Wisdom

“His *pilegesh* was unfaithful to him.”⁷ It is often noted that the woman at the center of this story is unnamed, the inference being that this enacts her erasure.⁸ Yet none of the characters in this story has a name. Verse 1 introduces the woman’s husband simply: “There was a man, a Levite, a migrant (גר) in the far-off parts of the hill country of Ephraim.” Tribe and spatial (dis)location alone identify the primary characters: the man from nowhere, and of a tribe distributed everywhere (Deut 14:27), who currently lives in Ephraim; the woman from Bethlehem in Judah (19:2); the old man in Gibeah, previously from the remote hill country of Ephraim.

2. Kynes, *Obituary*, 254.

3. Wilson, *Joseph, Wise and Otherwise*, 5.

4. In his engagement with the ethical questions raised by feminist hermeneutics about Judges 19, Nicholas Ansell also rereads the narrative in light of wisdom themes in the text, recovering the text as an ethical call for discernment. While my reading will arrive at a similar place, our paths will diverge at important points. Ansell, “Body.”

5. Fowler, *Kinds*, 22; Frow, *Genre*, 2; Ricoeur, “Hermeneutical Function,” 135.

6. Gerhart, “Generic Competence,” 36; see also “Generic Studies,” 316.

7. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

8. So, e.g., Trible, *Texts*, 65, 80.

Introducing the characters with broad spatial references rather than names does not confine them to two-dimensional typecasts (they turn out, as we will see, to be very complex characters). Their anonymity may, however, position us to look for the broad principles at play in their lives. If so, this lends itself to wisdom's search for what is generally true.

Before we meet any of these characters, however, there is one figure—the king—who is significant because absent. The narrative opens: “In those days Israel had no king.” This significant phrase from Judges 17:6 and 18:1 will return again in 21:25, bookending the story and hinting at the text's rhetorical goals. There is no further mention of kingship in this family tragedy, so why intrude by mentioning the king's absence? Because the absence of wise statecraft is one central wisdom theme of this episode. The narrator is inviting us to observe the spiritual and political state of pre-monarchical Israel and draw our own conclusions based on what we see. We are about to be taken into an ethical world which is slightly different—the narrator seems to assume, or why else tell us?—to the one we are familiar with. This field trip is designed to be instructive; we are meant to be asking, right from the beginning, “What can this story teach us about a nation's health?”

The first and last time the king's absence is noted in Judges the implications are spelled out for us: “In those days Israel had no king; a man [איש] would do what was right in his own eyes.” The man who acts according to his own eyes is a regular feature of wisdom literature (Prov 12:15; 16:2; 21:2; 26:5, 12, 16; 28:11). Here in Judges 19:1 the following clause begins very similarly: “In those days Israel had no king; there was a man [איש] . . .” But at this point in the sentence the pattern is broken, and the man who does what is right in his own eyes becomes incarnate and enters the story as “a certain Levite” (NRSV). The role of the proverbial איש (*ish*) who does whatever seems right to himself will, in this episode, be played by this Levite in Ephraim.⁹ A narrative or saga cycle centered upon an emblematic figure is a fitting vehicle for a wisdom text—we might think of Job, “a man in the land of Uz” (Job 1:1)—although it remains to be seen how righteous a sufferer this Levite is.

The first thing this man does is take an אישה (*ishah*) for himself, which would normally mean that he has married a “wife” (even in King Rehoboam's dark days: 2 Chr 11:18). Yet here the normal marriage customs are modified by a second description: the woman is a פילגש (*pileg-esh*). This tricky word indicates some kind of wife of lower standing; back in Judges 8 we were told that apart from Gideon's many wives he also had

9. Later, by the mob: verse 24.

a “concubine” (NRSV) who bore him Abimelech, but here in Judges 19 no primary wife is mentioned.

This ambivalence is carefully and subtly drawn, and right from the start contributes to an air of unease about their relationship. We do well in English to avoid collapsing such studied ambivalence too quickly. The standard term “concubine,” for instance, imports inaccurate connotations of a palatial sex worker, and has not done much to mitigate the history of interpretation’s unfortunate bias against her. Instead, I will call her simply “the young woman” (נערה, *na’arah*). This is what she is called six times in verses 3–9, that short period in the story when she has taken refuge in her father’s house, and the last time that she is safe and living out her own agency. It is only outside this temporary refuge, in verses 1–2 and 9–29, that she is referred to as the man’s פילגש (*pilegesh*). The word נערה (*na’arah*) I think comes closest to how the narrator wants us to remember her: as a vulnerable young woman in the liminal space between the safety of her childhood and all the risks and opportunities of adult life.

Whatever her marital status, her new life with the Levite is clearly not straightforward or happy; we are perhaps not meant to be surprised when it breaks down. The MT tells us in verse 2 that the young woman then does something: והזנה (*vatizneh*). Precisely what this means is also notoriously difficult. The root זנה (*znh*) normally means to “fornicate” or perhaps “act as a prostitute” (see Lev 21:9). If this is what the word means, then the young woman is unfaithful עלייו (*‘alayv*, “against him”). Yet we would usually expect the injured husband to be introduced by the preposition מן (*min*, see Ps 73:28); the preposition על (*‘al*) would more naturally introduce the *cause* of the fornication (see Ezek 16:15).¹⁰ No mention is made of whom she committed adultery with, so some take it that her unfaithfulness consisted merely in deserting her husband and returning to the family home. Others suggest an otherwise unattested alternative meaning for the root זנה (*znh*) might be “to feel repugnance,”¹¹ which would make more sense of the prepositional phrase “against him.” This is partly by analogy with the Akkadian *zenū* and partly because the ancient versions more clearly take her side: in the Greek the young woman either ὠργίσθη (“became angry”) or ἐπορεύθη (“departed”) the Levite, and in Targum Jonathan she ובסרת (*uvasarat*, “despised”) him.

This detail has become an unhealthy obsession for later commentators, who seek either to show that what happens to her is a kind of poetic justice for her adultery, or to form her into the perfect victim by expunging any

10. GCK, §249.

11. “זנה,” HALOT; DCH. Alternatively, the verb can be amended to זנה (“to reject”).

hint of wrongdoing from her backstory.¹² Neither project is well advised; the most we can say is that there was some fault on someone's side. Yet Ansell's sapiential reading of Judges 19 needs the young woman to be exonerated here so she can be fully disassociated from unwise Israel—otherwise his sapiential gender symbolism does not work.¹³ In contrast, on my reading this finely balanced ambivalence actually serves the wisdom genre: presenting her, as Hamley describes it, as a complex character rather than a type character.¹⁴ Much as wisdom literature requires us to give up trite ethical answers and walk through ambivalence and contradiction on the path to wisdom, the narrator here is inviting us to withhold judgment and sit with the complexity of her situation for a while.

The young woman returns to her father and spends four months there in Bethlehem in Judah (19:2) before her husband gets up and goes after her to speak “to her heart” (19:3), trying to convince her to return. This love poetry language (see Song 5:4) raises hope for a happy ending. Indeed, when the Levite arrives we are told that his “father-in-law, the young woman's father, rejoiced to see him” (19:3) and insists that he stay.

However, from this point on the young woman herself disappears from view; we have no idea how she feels about her husband's arrival and her father's lavish five-day hospitality. Four times the Levite tries to leave with her, but three times the father is successful in delaying him. This does several things at different levels of the story.

At the level of characterisation, this gives us pause to reflect on the character of the father.¹⁵ Is he desperately trying to buy time for his daughter while he works out whether it is good for her to return? On the one hand, he seems pleased to see the Levite at first (19:3). Yet he must have sympathy for his daughter's cause in leaving the Levite, or else he presumably would not have provided her refuge in the first place. Then again, perhaps this is the kind of aggressively generous hospitality that an ageing father in that culture might be expected to lavish upon a man who is giving his daughter a second chance at economic security.

Whatever we make of the father's character and motivations, the delay underlines the theme of hospitality—a sharp contrast to the trio's treatment in Gibeah. His delaying tactics also serve the narrative arc by escalating the tension. The reader, like the Levite, is delayed here in Bethlehem, with repetition and reported speech slowing down the narrative time. The first

12. See Thompson, *Writing*, 179–221.

13. Ansell, “Body,” 78.

14. Hamley, *Unspeakable*, 88 n. 251.

15. See Lapsley, *Whispering*, 41.

three days pass quickly, but on the fourth day comes the first of four direct speeches from the young woman's father to his son-in-law (verses 5, 6, 8, and 9). Each time the man urges him to "strengthen" (5, 8) or "gladden" (6, 9) his heart, just as he originally arrived with the intention of speaking to his wife's heart (19:3). While we never hear the Levite's reply, the first and third times the persuasion seems to work and the two men (the woman is never included) eat and drink (19:6), then eat (19:8) some more. The second time the Levite gets up to leave, but his father-in-law pressures him to stay the night. The final time, the speech from the father-in-law is much longer, yet is met with a wordless refusal as the man declines to stay the night and gets up one last time to leave (19:10).

Symbolically, an ill-advised journey is a fitting plot device for exploring wisdom's concern with choosing the right track—avoid the darkness of the wicked path (Prov 4:19) and the way of the fool (Prov 12:15) which "seems right to a man but its end is the way to death" (Prov 14:12; 16:25); choose the "way of the LORD" (Prov 10:29); trust him and he will "make your paths straight" (Prov 3:6). But it is not just symbolic journeys that require wisdom. If wisdom is the ability to form a successful plan,¹⁶ then the Levite's departure serves the wisdom theme as a study in tragically poor logistics. He accepts the father's offer to stay as he is about to leave early on the morning of the fifth day, but then later that day rejects the father's observation that "night is coming" and leaves anyway—only now it is far too late to be setting off on a forty kilometer journey. Wisdom is partly "the ability to anticipate consequences."¹⁷ His equivocation means they have not left nearly enough time to get home, and he sends them into the single most predictable danger of any journey: night. Mere hours into their daylong journey home, with darkness approaching, the servant suggests that they stop at Jebus, then a non-Israelite town. The Levite would prefer to stay with his fellow Israelites, and so he insists that they push on two hours further north to Gibeah. Here the street-smart servant's intuitions provide a tragic foil for the Levite's folly. In contrast to the journey in 1 Samuel 9 where, as Wilson observes, God's background activity is actuated through the wisdom of Saul's servant, here the wisdom of the servant is ignored.¹⁸

They must have been relieved to make it before sunset in the town square of Gibeah. Yet, in a breach of the obligations to any traveller—much more a Levite!—nobody offers them lodging for the night. There is here an unsettling reversal of expectations—the hostility of Canaanite Jebus and the hospitality

16. Wilson, *Joseph, Wise and Otherwise*, 240.

17. Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures*, 451.

18. Wilson, *Joseph, Wise and Otherwise*, 267.

of the Israelite Gibeah are reversed, as the narrator silently plays with expectations and stereotypes. Eventually an old man, himself a migrant from the Levite's home in Ephraim, comes back from working late in the fields. He asks them where they are coming from and going to, and the Levite explains, adding that nobody has offered them a place to stay, despite them having more than enough provisions for the party to ensure they do not impose. The old man greets them with peace and assures them he will indeed meet their needs and that they should not pass the night in the square (19:20).

Perhaps this, at last, is the wise man who can say with Job: "the stranger has not lodged in the street; I have opened my doors to the traveler" (Job 31:32 NRSV)? Yet the wisdom theme of hospitality is invoked only to be dramatically subverted. While they are enjoying his hospitality, the house is suddenly surrounded by townsmen who are described as בני בליעל, "sons of worthlessness." They are an incarnation of the proverbial sons who have not listened to wisdom's advice but have thrown in their lot with the "worthless" man (Prov 6:12; 16:27; 19:28). They demand that the old man bring out the Levite so that they may ידע ("know") him. The intertextual connections with Genesis 19 have been building—the night scene, the visitors in the town square, the resident alien's hospitality—but the demand to "know" the strangers makes the echo into a shout (Gen 19:5). Yet "neither story is a blind reflection of the other" but rather each "is an independent and purposeful composition."¹⁹ It is possible to focus too much on the linguistic similarities between the passages and ignore that with this repetition there is a more fundamental reversal. The dark melody of the Sodomite town has been transposed into a new, Israelite, key—and the effect is even more dissonant.

Any doubts commentators might have about the sexual connotations of the request to "know" the men in Genesis 19 are settled here in Judges 19 by what happens to the young woman when they "know her" in verse 25. Certainly, the old man understands their intention straight away, and he desperately tries to talk them out of it. Though he addresses them as "my brothers," the old man's speech to his neighbours begins with the tone of the father figure in Proverbs reasoning with his son: "do not be wicked; since this man has come into my house, do not do this stupid thing" (19:23). The two phrases אל־תִּרְעוּ (*al-tare'u*) and אל־תַּעֲשׂוּ אֶת־הַנְּבִלָה הַזֹּאת (*al-ta'asu et-hanvalah hazot*) offer an improvised bi-colon reminiscent of a sentence proverb's typical parallelism, and feature two words straight out of Proverbs: the root רעע (*r*) echoes the admonishment of proverbial evildoers (Prov 4:16; 17:4; 24:8; 24:19) and the root נבל (*nbl*) reminds us of

19. Edenburg, *Dismembering*, 175.

the proverbial fool (Prov 17:7, 21; 30:32). We might expect God, as in the parallel story in Genesis 19, to intervene at this point: if not blinding them (Gen 19:11) then at least handing them over to someone like Jael, who has her own way of dealing with rapists (Judg 4:21; 5:30). But, as in the Joseph narrative, these chapters of Judges sit apart from the rest: in typical wisdom fashion God's agency is backgrounded.²⁰

For the time being, at least, the moral order seems clear: the band of evildoers outside, threatening the old man and the Levite inside. It is an awful situation, but the line between good and evil is, up to this point, preserved. The horrifying twist in this story, however, is that in the end it is not the ravenous sons of Benjamin outside who are responsible for the greatest horror—it is the old man and the Levite inside. Without waiting for the men's response to his appeal to wisdom, the old man enters into exactly the kind of compromise and complicity with wickedness that wisdom figures like Joseph, Job, and Daniel would never have entertained:

Look—my virgin daughter and his *pilegesh*, how about I bring them out to you; you rape them, do to them whatever is good in your eyes—but to this man do not do this disgraceful thing.
(19:24)

The repetition of “in your eyes” reminds us of the wisdom theme invoked in verse 1. No longer shrouded in the crowd's euphemistic word “knowledge,” the old man names exactly what they are here for: the word ענה (*nh*) in the *piel binyan* implies affliction or, as here, the humiliation of forced sexual intercourse (see 2 Sam 13:12). Two women to save one man—it is an obscene offer, made all the more unthinkable by the fact that it is the father of one of the women making it. We are perhaps relieved to hear that the men are not willing to listen to it. But our horror at a father's words is quickly eclipsed by a husband's actions. Without another word, “the man seizes his *pilegesh*” and throws her outside to them (19:25).²¹

The family, like the royal court, is a classic “wisdom setting.”²² Yet within the supposed safety of the household we are confronted by two wicked men: the father who offers his own daughter, and the husband who casts out, abandons, perhaps murders (the Hebrew is ambiguous), and then mutilates his own wife. That the iniquity of the Canaanites materialises so dramatically in the domestic sphere reflects in a perverse way wisdom literature's interest in the family as a context for instruction: “Listen my

20. Wilson, *Joseph, Wise and Otherwise*, 259.

21. Though grammatically the subject could be the old man.

22. Wilson, *Joseph, Wise and Otherwise*, 28.

son to the discipline of your father, and do not abandon the *torah* of your mother” (Prov 1:8). Only here, the discipline on offer is a crash course in the deep depravity of the nation.

Betrayed by her husband, and abused all night, we are left with a haunting final image of the woman lying in the street with her hands towards the threshold of the door (19:26–27).²³ Here Ansell’s identification of the young woman with Lady Wisdom herself is most persuasive:²⁴

Wisdom in the street cries out
in the town squares (רחבות) she puts out her voice
over the top of the bustle she calls out
at the city gates, her words. (Prov 1:20–21, see also 8:3)

Yet nobody in this city’s רחב (*rkhov*, 19:17) is listening to her. Not until the man (now “her master,” 19:27) emerges in the morning and callously tells her to “get up” does anyone pay her even passing attention, and by then her voice is extinguished, and he receives no response. Lady Wisdom is abused and discarded—a martyr for the iniquities of her nation.

Is she alive or dead when he puts her on his donkey? Or when he takes her on the daylong journey home? Or when he takes the knife and divides her limb-by-limb into twelve pieces (19:29)? Unlike the LXX, which reassures us by commuting his crime to mutilation of his wife’s corpse, the Hebrew does not tell us either way. The ambivalence is excruciating.

The story ends with outrage, and from here events escalate into the political arena, as the wisdom setting transitions from family to the realm of onlooking sages, or perhaps a (in those days, vacant) royal court. All who see her mutilated body say:

It hasn’t happened . . . such a thing hasn’t been seen . . . not from
the day the sons of Israel came up from the land of Egypt until
this day. Get on top of it! Take counsel! And speak out! (19:30)

This rare moment of explicit commentary, placed in the mouths of an invisible chorus of onlookers, carries significant wisdom freight. “All who see it” is כלה־ראה, “every seer”; the word elsewhere is used for those with prophetic insight, such as Samuel in 1 Samuel 9:11, and indeed keeping on the path of wisdom requires the skill of observing reality rightly. The mute, and now mutilated, body challenges the twelve tribes to respond wisely, in a process of judgment: get on top of it (שימו־לכם עליה), take counsel (עצו), and finally speak out about it (ודברו). This is the same challenge, in three

23. Lapsley, *Whispering*, 48.

24. Ansell, “Body,” 81.

slightly different imperatives, as Proverbs 31:9: “Open your mouth! Judge righteously! Defend the rights of the poor and needy!”

We can read this as a strong invitation, like that of Proverbs 1:5–6, to seek wisdom in our public response to private evil, exercising judgment based on godly observation and reflection. Yet that is not what happens next in the story. The poor young woman’s death will provoke, not wise and measured “speaking out,” but even more horrific and ill-advised acts of violence in the following chapters. Lady Wisdom’s warning from beside the road that “all who hate me love death” (Prov 8:34) comes true: her death leads to ever-escalating cycles of violence, genocide, and mass rape. Wilson observes that the goal of wisdom is to find life.²⁵ Joseph’s wisdom is shown in his work saving life from famine, and his refusal to retaliate against his brothers by killing them when he has the perfect opportunity, instead bringing reconciliation and ensuring the continuation of the covenant family—especially Benjamin, whose fate is at one point in his hands (Gen 44). Here is the Joseph story almost in reverse: life is cheapened, retaliation is disproportionate, violence escalates into mass death—and as a result of this rejection of wisdom the covenant is imperilled, and Benjamin very nearly destroyed.

Ambivalence and Discontinuity

Throughout this reading I have noted some of the resonances that emerge in Judges 19 when read alongside the traditional wisdom texts. Yet there is more to genre than mere intertextuality.²⁶ One crucial dimension of genre is that it specifies strategies for readers—not just writers—for engaging with a text. It is here that the payoff of the wisdom lens becomes clear.

Commentators are routinely troubled by the gaps and inconsistencies in Judges 19—it seems almost riddled with them! I have noted some of these already. The starkest example of this is the negotiation at the center of the story’s dark plotline. Faced with the threat of male-male anal rape of the Levite on his doorstep, the host desperately offers the men of the city two women who they can abuse as much as they like, so long as they do not commit this “outrageous thing” against the one man.

The terms of the bargain have rightly scandalized the history of reception—on what sick calculus is the abuse of two women less “outrageous” than that of a single man, especially when one of them is the man’s own daughter!²⁷ Besides, if these men are “sodomites” then why do they accept

25. Wilson, *Joseph, Wise and Otherwise*, 241.

26. Contra Kynes, *Obituary*, 110.

27. We might wonder if the old man even *has* a virgin daughter, or if this is a

a woman in place of the man if that is their true nature and desire? Leaving aside the ethical issues of the exchange, the sequence of the negotiations is simply odd—two women are refused, but one woman then accepted. Accordingly, commentators must either explain a complex motivation,²⁸ or see the discontinuity in the men’s response as a defect owing to its dependence on Genesis 19.²⁹

In contrast, the wisdom genre lens helps us see this discontinuity as a feature, not a flaw. The unexplained discontinuity between their refusal and their actions gives the reader pause—the detail is perhaps not important in the broader narrative, but nevertheless the discontinuity makes it hard not to get the scene stuck in our mind at this point. The men become a riddle, of sorts—but one that will never fall out in a simple “aha!” moment. What it does instead is force us to think about them over and over. Given the proverbial anthropology of the wicked, perhaps we are ultimately not meant to see these men as reasonable agents calmly negotiating to achieve their considered goals. This is a mob, after all, not a delegation. The nature of their sin is that it is opportunistic and irrational: that their stated intentions in verbal negotiations might be incoherent or might break down in their actions when suddenly given power over an actual woman’s body, is entirely in keeping with the proverbial worldview. The nature of the path that they have chosen—the path of the violent and the wicked—is that it is impulsive, undisciplined, incoherent, and ultimately self-destructive. We should not be surprised by our own capacity for wickedness—that is why it is wise to keep far away from even the opportunity to do evil, particularly when it comes to the powerful forces of lust (Prov 5:8). The narrator could, of course, just have told us all this, but the ambivalence and discontinuity forces us to sit, and think it over for ourselves.

Conclusion

Ambivalence is a favourite tool of the wisdom texts. Proverbs 26:4–5 for example: should you rebuke a fool according to his folly, or not? Ellen Davis captures the rhetorical strategy of Proverbs as forcing us to “ruminate slowly on one saying and then another,” which helps us to acquire the “habit of slowly reconsidering what once seemed clear.”³⁰ Likewise, part of the genius of Job is the way each speaker leads us further down the garden path as

desperate ruse?

28. See Bal, *Dissymmetry*, 120; Hamley, *Unspeakable*, loc. 5342.

29. Edenburg, *Dismembering*, 179.

30. Davis, *Opening Israel’s Scriptures*, 451.

the apparent coherence of each speech is met by discontinuity—one thing seems right, until another speaks (Prov 18:17).

This wisdom lens brings out what the ambivalence and discontinuity of Judges 19 invite the reader to do. The narrator constantly complicates things for us: the honorable Levite seeking his wife's heart becomes a callous monster, the hostile Canaanite and hospitable Israelite towns swap places, and the righteous outrage at Gibeah leads to a far greater outrage against Benjamin in the following chapters. In the broader context of the Former Prophets, we are required to sit with the ambivalence of political solutions: the monarchy is one answer to the escalating chaos of tribal retribution we see in Judges 19–21. But monarchy is a solution with its own discontinuities, and the wise do well to see those clearly as well. After all, knowing which of two contradictory statements applies to which situation is what Proverbs trains us in.

For my generation, raised on fairy tales and Facebook, it is impossible to understate how vital this is. Fairy tales present the world in black and white, with characters whose names reduce them to a single moral axis: the wicked stepmother, the beautiful princess, the wise king. Social media trains us through its relentless rituals to form judgments quickly—like, dislike, outrage, block. The wisdom genre requires something very different of us. At every turn it frustrates our attempts to make quick judgments about the characters, or jump to tidy ethical conclusions. We are invited to sit with the wise and observe the messiness of reality, with all its ambivalence and discontinuity; to get on top of it, take counsel, and then, only then, to speak out.

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