

Foreword

by Professor Patrick Kalilombe

The Word of Wisdom is, for me, a paradoxical achievement. It is at one and the same time vulnerable and yet powerfully explosive. Probably Shelagh Ranger would not want to consider herself a professional academic. And yet here she is, boldly entering the area of Theology and Religious Studies, precisely in the specialized category of 'Creation and Ecological Theology'. Here she summons and challenges African and other thinkers from the so-called 'Third World' to come along with her. The repeated calls she makes to them in this book remind one of Prophetess Deborah of old, that 'mother in Israel' (Judges 5:7), who took the initiative to rally the embattled troops of Israel (Judges 4:6-10). Deborah dared them to come out and do battle against formidable odds. Shelagh is encouraging African thinkers to claim a terrain where Western theological specialists, with their accustomed 'scientific' tools of investigation, have tended to dominate. The African thinkers should not think that they do not have the required weapons. On the contrary, they should seek to take the lead, for they do have the most appropriate tool: the 'Wisdom of Sheba'.

As I read the book, it seems to me that Shelagh is making several important points:

- The Theology of Creation and Ecology, which is developing fast these days, is a most important development in theological thinking. Its insights about the importance of human relations with animals and the rest of creation are peculiarly relevant to the needs of a new global theology.
- What she has identified as 'The Wisdom of Sheba' is the appropriate tool for articulating such a theology.
- This Wisdom of Sheba is a traditional heritage of Africa, so it is available to African theologians if only they open their eyes to discover it all around them, and learn to make use of it in their theologizing.

One may ask: But where is this Wisdom of Sheba to be found, and what kind of insights does it contain?

In answer, the book calls attention to several areas of the African

heritage, old as well as contemporary. Shelagh has identified six such areas and has turned them into as many Sections of the book. In each Section she has collected concrete samples of 'literature' out of which the insights of this Wisdom can be teased. The large number of extracts included in the anthology, the wide variety of their provenance and the long span of time over which they are spread, are proof of extensive and careful research. And yet there is no pretension of presenting them as exhaustive. It is clear that the selection has been commanded by the compiler's understanding of what the Wisdom of Sheba is supposed to be. The introductions to each Section, where the selected extracts are presented and commented on, give the reader an idea of her interpretation and modes of discussion. The judgments as to how and what the selected texts exhibit as 'The Wisdom of Sheba' are evidently personal; they are not presented as prescriptive, but simply as suggestive and open to further discussion.

Nevertheless they are invaluable in that they suggest a number of ways for making sense of these widely differing types of literature, most of which would be resistant to the usual set of rules of academic interpretation. These ways have undoubtedly much in common with the manner the owners and users of these genres of popular folklore have traditionally been making sense of them. Those traditions are here being affirmed, valorized and vindicated.

I was suggesting that Shelagh's book is vulnerable and runs the risk of being dismissed by formal academics. Such people will object that the book is nothing but a collection of texts from all kinds of incompatible sources, and that out of them no demonstrably tight line of argument can be drawn. And indeed the selection is unashamedly eclectic and the conclusions sometimes arrived at in unconventional ways. Other scholars will take issue with the way the supernatural and the miraculous seem to be taken seriously. Angels and demons, spirits of the dead, animals, trees, and even natural features of the landscape converse and interact with ordinary people, arguing serious issues of human life and destiny. It is as if they all constitute one community and are responsible for and answerable to one another for the universe they all have a right to share. Is that not the stuff of children's fairy tales? What kind of 'Wisdom' could come out of such naive and imaginary material to enrich serious theological discussion?

Such objections would show that the point being made in this book has not been understood. What may sound shocking and unacceptable to some people is precisely what makes the book so powerful. This 'Wisdom of Sheba' is in line with a particular world-view according to which the whole of creation, with its diverse parts, belongs together as

an organic community under their common Creator and Sustainer. It is like the way the various members of the human body relate to one another as inter-dependent, mutually complementary units in order to assure their common survival, growth and development.

In the same way the various components of the universe: the visible as well as the invisible, humankind as well as the animal world, other animate and inanimate beings, were created to function together in mutual service and care. Humanity, conscious of having been made in the image of the Creator, may consider itself as the head and/or heart of this universe. But that does not mean it is the sole repository of the art of successful global living: humanity should be ready to learn, through attentive and respectful observation, from the ‘wisdom’ exhibited in the rest of creation. Neither should the human species act as though the whole universe is just for its own selfish needs and interests, and permit itself to dominate, oppress and exploit at will the rest of creation. The other partners too have legitimate rights; and if these are not respected, the delicate balance of creation is destroyed. The resulting disaster punishes not only the injured members, but also ultimately the human community itself.

As the collection of extracts in the present anthology demonstrates, this is the world-view that has been characteristic of most human cultures, in the past as well as in our contemporary world. If I understand correctly, the central point being made by *The Word of Wisdom* is that, in the current ecological crisis, the insights of this world-view are sorely needed. I hope the African theologians who are being called upon will take the summons seriously and go to look with new eyes at the rich heritage of their ancestors. Who knows? What they may have tended to undervalue, due to their ‘Western’ education, might prove to be part of the salvation of the present world.

Rt. Rev. P.A.Kalilombe
Zomba
Malawi