

Ecclesiastes 9:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.

Analysis

Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength (וְאָמַרְתִּי אֲנִי טוֹבָה חֲכָמָה מִגְּבוּרָה, ve'amarti ani tovah chokhmah migevurah)—'and I said, better is wisdom than might.' The comparison tovah... min (better than) is Ecclesiastes' favored formulation for value judgments. **Nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard** (וְחֲכָמַת הַמִּסְכֵּן בְּזוּיָהּ וּדְבָרָיו אֵינָם נִשְׁמָעִים, vechakhmat hamisken bezuyah udvarav einam nishma'im)—literally 'yet the wisdom of the poor is despised, and his words are not heard.'

Qoheleth draws two conclusions from the parable:

1. wisdom intrinsically surpasses strength—the principle affirmed
2. wisdom from low-status sources gets ignored—the practice observed.

The passive participle bezuyah (despised, treated with contempt) and negative einam nishma'im (are not heard) reveal society's tragic pattern: truth's validity depends on the speaker's status rather than content's merit. Jesus faced this: 'Is not this the carpenter's son?' (Matthew 13:55)—dismissing His wisdom based on humble origins. James rebukes this: 'Show no partiality... if a poor man in shabby clothing comes in... do you not discriminate?' (James 2:1-4). The Kingdom inverts earthly valuations: the last become first (Matthew 20:16).

Historical Context

Ancient (and modern) honor-shame cultures assigned credibility based on social status—nobility's words carried weight, peasants' didn't, regardless of actual merit. Biblical wisdom consistently challenges this pattern, highlighting God's use of unlikely sources.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How might prejudice based on social status cause you to dismiss wise counsel from unexpected sources?
2. In what areas is the Church guilty of privileging wealth, education, or status over wisdom's actual content?
3. What practices could help you evaluate ideas based on truth rather than the speaker's social standing?

Interlinear Text

וְאָמַר רַחֲמֵי	אָ נִי	טוֹבָה הִיא	וְחָכְמָה תִּתֶּנִּי	מִגְבוּרָה הִיא	וְחָכְמָה תִּתֶּנִּי
Then said	H589	is better	I Wisdom	than strength	I Wisdom
H559		H2896	H2451	H1369	H2451
הַמְסִכִּין	בְּזוּיָהּ הִיא	וְדִבְרֵי יוֹ	אֵין מִ	נִשְׁמָעִים:	
nevertheless the poor man's	is despised	and his words	H369	are not heard	
H4542	H959	H1697		H8085	

Additional Cross-References

Ecclesiastes 7:19 (Parallel theme): Wisdom strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men which are in the city.

Proverbs 24:5 (Parallel theme): A wise man is strong; yea, a man of knowledge increaseth strength.

Proverbs 21:22 (Parallel theme): A wise man scaleth the city of the mighty, and casteth down the strength of the confidence thereof.

Proverbs 10:15 (Parallel theme): The rich man's wealth is his strong city: the destruction of the poor is their poverty.

Ecclesiastes 9:18 (Parallel theme): Wisdom is better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good.