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## *The Songs of Leonard Cohen as Wisdom Literature*

**An article from the Cathedral Times  
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip**

Several books of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, defy easy moral category. They are not really law, not really history, and not really prophecy. While they offer some practical wisdom, some of their passages cannot really be understood as moral example for us, either. They are the Books of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and The Song of Solomon.

Most of us are familiar with some of the Psalms, many of whose verses really are morally exemplary. However, the Psalms cover the full gamut of human experience and emotion, and not just the comforting aspects of human emotion. Much of the material in the Psalms is sheer human fear, not necessarily exemplary at all. For instance, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is the agonizing question of Psalm 22; we hesitate to think that God would even forsake us, and yet these are the words that our Lord Jesus quoted on the cross in his death.

The Book of Job recounts the terror and confusion and suffering of one who is truly innocent; saints and sinners alike, through the centuries, have asked the same question as does the Book of Job: "why do the innocent suffer?" The Book of Proverbs contains clever and practical aphorisms, but one wonders about any divine revelation there. The Song of Solomon is, pure and simple, an erotic love poem; one can interpret it as a love song to God, but it reads much more easily as a love song between two human beings!

Finally, we have probably all been fascinated with the Book of Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity. , I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind." It was Ecclesiastes 3 that was turned into a popular folk by Pete Seeger in the 1960's, "To Everything There is a Season; Turn, Turn, Turn" (Pete Seeger has just died this week; thank you, Pete for having fulfilled your purpose under heaven; may you Sing Out in a new life!).

There is not much miracle and supernatural revelation in these books of the Bible, and yet we acknowledge that they contain much wisdom, wisdom that can rightly be called spiritual. They have come to be named the "Wisdom Literature" of the Bible.

I have come to see the same sort of wisdom in a poet and singer of our own generation, Leonard Cohen. Leonard Cohen, now almost eighty years old, grew up Jewish in a Christian school in Montreal (he has said, "I love Jesus. Always did, even as a kid. I kept it to myself; I didn't stand up in shul and say "I love Jesus."" (from Sylvie Simmons' biography of Leonard Cohen, *I'm Your Man*, Kindle location 325).

However, the life, songs, and poetry of Leonard Cohen also defy religious category. In my estimation, his work represents a spiritual "wisdom tradition" in our own time. He writes and sings about love, struggle, solitude, despair, and relationships""in both the human and divine aspects of all these topics. And he does so with a whimsical poetic spirit that takes us to a dimension that is as deep as his voice!

This Sunday, at the Dean's Forum, I will present an introduction and overview of the wisdom literature of Leonard Cohen. Perhaps some of his songs will be familiar to you: he wrote "Suzanne" back in the 1960's ("Suzanne takes you down to her place by the river"), but he also wrote "Hallelujah," which has been covered by so many artists in recent years.

*Show me the place, help me roll away the stone,  
Show me the place, I can't move this thing alone.  
Show me the place where the Word became a man.  
Show me the place where the suffering began.*

(Leonard Cohen, "Show Me the Place," from the album, *Old Ideas*)

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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