

Is wisdom only contained in restricted sections of the Old Testament or is it possible to argue that there is a sense in which wisdom permeates the whole of it? How does this affect the transformative potential of Old Testament Wisdom?

**Jon Rogers**

*MA*

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*John Wilks*

*Wisdom and Transformation*

## Contents

1 Introduction.....	1
2 Wisdom?.....	1
3 In the Scriptures?.....	1
4 Narratives.....	2
5 Pentateuch.....	3
6 Psalms, Prophets and beyond.....	4
7 Transformative Potential.....	5

## 1 Introduction

Our twenty-first century culture seems addicted to the new and contemporary, often falling foul of what C.S. Lewis called ‘chronological snobbery’.<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging progress and engaging with contemporary culture, in the spirit of renaissance, we must engage with the wisdom of the sages of history. That engagement must go far beyond a simple reading of the translation in our hands, but must take in the context the words were spoken and written into, then attempt to bring them into our own context.

As we seek out wisdom in the Scriptures, we find it to be elusive. The designation ‘Wisdom’ is commonly given to three books in the Old Testament, but many have sought out its influence on other passages of scripture. Scholars have looked for characteristics of these ‘wisdom books’ and then applied these as a rubric to find wisdom writing in other parts of scripture. In this paper, we will look at what wisdom is, what features of it we might find in other texts and discuss what potential for transformation might come from this reading of scripture.

## 2 Wisdom?

Wisdom seems to be an elusive word, evading definitions, though many have been multiplied. Zimmerli defines it as ‘Mastery of Everyday Life and its Concrete Secrets’.<sup>2</sup> The book of Proverbs twice states that ‘the fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom’ (Prov 1:7 and 9:10)<sup>3</sup> and Psalm 111:10 and Job 28:8 echo it. Wisdom is given by YHWH (Prov 2:6) and it covers a broad spectrum from practical skills<sup>4</sup> and wise rule<sup>5</sup> to moral living (TK). It seems that every author has a different definition of wisdom – as Job 28:12 asks ‘where shall wisdom be found?’

## 3 In the Scriptures?

The three books that are commonly called ‘Wisdom literature’ fall in the *Ketuvim* or Writings. Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are very different to the rest of the Old Testament scriptures and very different from each other. Proverbs, especially, seems to focus on a wisdom based in the home and family; Job is a conversation between friends (until God Himself shows up) and Koholeth seems profoundly lonely, despite all he owns and does. Each is a complex book to interpret but some themes are clear across all of the books.

Each of the wisdom books contain proverbs or aphorisms describing life, often by means of contrasts in a couplet design. Each book also contains passages of poetry using vivid metaphor. It is notable that there is little description of the cultic activity of Israel in the wisdom books despite Ecclesiastes and much of

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1 Lewis, *Joy*, 207.

2 Zimmerli, *Theology*, 155.

3 See also Job 28:8, Ps 111:10, Isa 33:6, Mic 6:9.

4 E.g. Ex 28:3, where those who made the priestly garments are described as using wisdom; Ex 31:3, 35:31 where the craftsman Bezalel is filled with the Spirit of God and wisdom; Whybray (‘Slippery’, 362) refers to Prov 24:3 and Ps 107:27 in this vein.

5 E.g. Deu 1:15, 34:9; Ezra 7:25.

Proverbs being ascribed to Solomon, the builder of the first temple. Wisdom is universal and not linked exclusively to the worship of God in Jerusalem at the temple.<sup>6</sup>

Zimmerli and others have argued that the wisdom of the Old Testament is based around a theology of Creation;<sup>7</sup> speaking of a God who creates and upholds rather than a God of Covenant, the God of Israel. Creation for the ancient Hebrew meant both the origins of everything and also the world around that they lived in.<sup>8</sup> Both Proverbs and Job emphasise the role of God in original creation and in holding back the forces of chaos. There are many facets to the wisdom depiction of God the creator and the role of Wisdom in the act of creation. Many layers of metaphor are used to show God as both in this world and outside of it, an architect, judge, teacher and warrior.<sup>9</sup>

Another theme of wisdom is education - both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are directed to young students, with a teacher calling them 'son'. It has been suggested that the wisdom books were used in schools to teach young men to be effective in the royal court.<sup>10</sup> Proverbs especially encourages learners to avoid moral corruption, giving examples of how to behave and be wise.

Wisdom has many aspects and themes, it is not simple to pin down in watertight definitions. The themes we have discussed here have been sought out in many passages of Old Testament scripture. As we look at some of the passages that research has focussed on, we will be able to assess whether wisdom themes can be found throughout the Old Testament.

#### 4 Narratives

Different techniques have been used by a variety of scholars to find the influence of wisdom outside of the *Ketuvim*. Beginning with von Rad, various narratives have been investigated and the techniques and findings of these readings have been debated. The story of Joseph is unusual in that it does not emphasise the covenant with God, but rather discusses the actions of a righteous and wise man and his elevation to be a supreme ruler which leads von Rad to characterise it as a wisdom narrative.<sup>11</sup>

Linking Joseph's story with the idea of wisdom schools preparing scribes to work in the civil service of the early monarchy, von Rad suggests that the example of the wise and virtuous Joseph was given to show that God would vindicate righteous behaviour.<sup>12</sup> He also points out that the themes of worship, covenant and God revealing himself are, for the most part, absent from the narrative.

In opposition, Crenshaw points out the failures for Joseph at the beginning and end of his life and the fact that Joseph is never trained or schooled for the ruling position he takes up. Joseph seems almost to be an

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6 Cohen, 'Literature', 723.

7 Zimmerli, 'Wisdom', 175, cf Perdue, *Wisdom*, 37.

8 Murphy, 'Creation', 5.

9 Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 121-122.

10 Lemaire, 'Sage', 172.

11 von Rad, 'Joseph', 293.

12 von Rad, 'Joseph', 294-295.

anti-role-model for an aspiring scribe!<sup>13</sup> Fox further makes the case that Pharaoh's ascription to Joseph of special revelation from God is alien to the wisdom writings, where wisdom is directed to God, rather than a personal revelation of God.<sup>14</sup> For Fox, the wisdom of the Joseph narrative is more closely linked with the wisdom of Daniel – centred around Divine intervention and inspiration rather than virtuous living and study.

While both Fox and Crenshaw find no possibility of viewing Joseph as a wisdom narrative, this idea should not be dismissed so quickly. While it may not be accurate to simply describe the Joseph narrative as a wisdom story, it clearly shows that the themes of wisdom are not restricted to a small section of society, but woven deep into the narrative history of Israel.

Following von Rad, more narratives have been investigated for wisdom themes underpinning them.<sup>15</sup> The book of Esther is famous for not mentioning the name of God at all<sup>16</sup>. Instead the heroine and her uncle Mordecai use wisdom to save the Jewish people from threatened annihilation. Talmon suggests that the book represents '*applied wisdom*'<sup>17</sup> (emphasis his), where the success of the wise Jews against their profane enemies is due to their application of the wisdom found in the wisdom books. Talmon finds the characterisation of the individuals very typological, with Mordecai the sage, Haman the cunning evil man and the 'witless dupe', king Ahasuerus.<sup>18</sup>

Gordis, in his critique of Talmon, emphasises the integrated nature of ancient society – there was no such thing as 'secularism' and wisdom was thoroughly integrated with God and His worship. The absence of God in Esther is not a case for a wisdom genre but indicative, with other evidences, of a Jew writing 'his book in the form of a chronicle of the Persian court, written by a Gentile scribe'.<sup>19</sup>

In these two narratives we have seen that some of the themes of wisdom are present, although perhaps not in the form that they were in the wisdom books. The wisdom of narratives is not the same as the didactic wisdom we find in the wisdom books, but the same themes come through.

## 5 Pentateuch

It is acknowledged by most scholars that the final versions of the wisdom books in scripture are late,<sup>20</sup> although many of their sources are acknowledged as much earlier. In investigating the origins of wisdom in Israel, the schools for training scribes for court and priests for the temple have been pointed to.<sup>21</sup> It is hard to definitively say much about the character of these schools before the exile, but it is clear that they

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13 Redford, 'Joseph', summarised in Fox, 'Joseph', 27.

14 Fox, 'Joseph', 36.

15 Crenshaw includes ('Influence', 129) Gen 1-11, 37, 39-50; Ex 34; all of Deut; 2 Sam 9-20; 1 Kings 1-2 and some of the prophets.

16 Tucker, 'Esther' 200.

17 Talmon, 'Esther', 427.

18 Talmon, 'Esther' 437-447.

19 Gordis, 'Esther', 375.

20 Crenshaw, 'Literature', 802.

21 Lemaire, 'Sage', 166; Davies, 'Schools', 199.

flourished during the second temple period<sup>22</sup>, leading eventually to intertestamental books like Ben Sirach. These schools have also been linked with the process of redaction of the Old Testament scriptures to their final form.

This has led to some interesting results, especially when the Pentateuch is seen as a whole. Although traditionally seen as the oldest of the Scriptures, written by Moses, academic study suggests that it evolved over centuries from several sources. Sailhammer has suggested that the very structure of the books has been redacted as an *apologia* to the changes in the Jewish religion. Witte comments that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are in ‘the spirit of late wisdom’,<sup>23</sup> and Sailhammer goes on to show how Joshua is characterised as a wise man,<sup>24</sup> being told to meditate on the book of the *Torah*.<sup>25</sup> This ‘bookending’ of the Pentateuch is said to represent the final redactor of the books, part of the wisdom school tradition during the Second Temple period. Joshua, the archetypal wise man, takes on the role of leading Israel from Moses, the archetypal prophet. So the redactor, in painting this picture, seeks to explain what has happened to Israel as the oracles of the prophets seem to be replaced by the leadership of sages.

## 6 Psalms, Prophets and beyond

Explorations of other passages of Old Testament scripture have uncovered wisdom themes, notably in the Psalms and the Prophets. While there is debate over which Psalms might be designated ‘wisdom psalms’,<sup>26</sup> ranging from those who say wisdom themes are a degrading intrusion<sup>27</sup> to those who affirm many wisdom psalms originating in the earliest years of Israel.<sup>28</sup> There is broad agreement that the themes of wisdom are found in several of the Psalms, suggesting that wisdom was important in worship.<sup>29</sup>

The influences of wisdom have been found in many of the books of the Prophets, from Isaiah to Malachi.<sup>30</sup> While the prophets scorn those who claim to be wise,<sup>31</sup> they use many ‘wisdom forms’ in their writings<sup>32</sup> and take up the themes of wisdom such as justice towards the poor<sup>33</sup> and the powerful God of creation<sup>34</sup>. The techniques of wisdom and the issues of the sages were close to the heart of the prophets and in this spirit, Hosea points out that the truly wise will find God (Hos 14:9).

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22 Lemaire ‘Sage’, 59.

23 Witte, *Urgeschichte*, as cited by Sailhammer, ‘Pentateuch’, 26.

24 Sailhammer, ‘Pentateuch’ 27; Deu 34:9.

25 Josh 1:8; cf Ps 1:2, widely acknowledged to be a ‘wisdom psalm’ (see Tucker ‘Psalms’, 589).

26 Murphy, as described in Crenshaw, ‘Psalms’, p10, is said to use ‘seven rhetorical devices’ to identify wisdom psalms: ‘(1) better sayings; (2) numerical sayings; (3) admonitions; (4) a teacher’s address to sons; (5) the formula of blessing; (6) use of similes; (7) alphabetic composition’. He also includes content-related signals of wisdom material.

27 Gunkel, ‘Psalms’ 21.

28 Dell, ‘Psalms’ 458.

29 Dell, ‘Psalms’ 458.

30 Shields, ‘Prophecy’, 880-881.

31 E.g. Isa 5:21, 19:12, 29:14, 44:25; Jer 8:8, 9:12, 9:23, 51:57 (my own search).

32 Shields, ‘Prophecy’, 879.

33 Throughout Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Amos.

34 E.g. Isa 43:15.

We find wisdom themes in so many different parts of the Old Testament scriptures, which is no surprise when we consider the latest redactors were the scribes and sages of the second temple era. It is, however, safe to assume that some of these themes may have been already present, since the traditions written down in the Proverbs are much older than the latest redaction of the book in the fifth century BCE.<sup>35</sup> As a theme in Jewish thought, wisdom appears to have started small and early, building to a crescendo in the ‘intertestamental’ period with the final redaction of the older texts and the writing of new ones.

Wisdom is a strand woven through the whole of the Old Testament, from the beginning of Genesis to the testimony of the prophets and beyond. It is hard to pin down, representing a rich and diverse tradition of thinking, but fundamentally organising itself around God. Brueggemann sees the wisdom tradition as a way of God speaking into parts of Israelite life where ‘the main claims of the core testimony are not persuasive.’<sup>36</sup> Wisdom speaks of a God who is other, undefined, seemingly absent yet deeply present in every detail of life.

## 7 Transformative Potential

With this great divergence of views of where wisdom can be found in scripture, what can we say about its use and transformative potential? We may discover some avenues of conversation with our contemporary culture which may be fruitful for investigation. Firstly, the wisdom of the Old Testament is neither simple nor singular. With the many themes we have looked at, wisdom is complex, multi-faceted and at times in tension of seeming contradiction. There is no simple overarching metanarrative spelled out in the wisdom of scripture – rather, we can read Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as a collection of *petits récits*<sup>37</sup> that explain how things appear in a set of different contexts. As a postmodern reader finds resonance with different proverbs or narratives in different situations they may be able to find that the wisdom of Scripture can speak to them in any situation.

Secondly, it may be helpful to consider that the Scriptures we have now have been finally shaped by redactors of the wisdom tradition. This implies that the multiplicity of perspective and narratives were seen by the wisdom school of the early second temple as a helpful way to engage with God. Wisdom itself can become a perspective to view the narratives of the Old Testament. Where we have difficult interpretations, this may throw light on possible resolutions and lessons that might be learned.

Further, we may go on to say from our readings of the Psalms and Prophets, that wisdom was thoroughly integrated in the Scriptures of the ancient Israelites. As we seek to dialogue with our culture, we must seek to ensure it is as deeply interwoven in our understanding of the worship of God and his directing of our present reality as it was for the psalmists of the exile and second temple and the prophets from the late first

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35 Cox, ‘Proverbs’, 624.

36 Brueggemann, *Theology* 335.

37 After Lyotard, *Postmodern*, 60.

temple onwards. We might do well to have their concern for knowing God in humility and their deep desire (though with fear) for His action in their present reality.

Reading the passages of scripture that we have called ‘wisdom’, we cannot help but touch on the issue of Creation. Over and over, we find God described as the creator and as the sustainer of life. We find him battling against the forces of chaos and toying with things far beyond the comprehension of the ancients. In our modernity, we have believed that by understanding those forces and even manipulating them, we might become gods. The wisdom of the Old Testament warns against that, and some of our own contemporary culture embraces the warning. Calling God ‘Creator’ is not an position of arrogant opposition to scientific progress, or a claim to fill ‘gaps’ in theories, but a description of unseen realities that are not merely ‘yet to be discovered’, but are beyond any comprehension. We must, in the spirit of Job and the words of Barth, ‘let God be God’.<sup>38</sup> In doing this we do not halt our quest for answers or knowledge, indeed, as proverbs says ‘fear of YHWH’ is the start to the quest – or the foundation of – real wisdom. Rather, we are honest that our presuppositions include God far beyond us instead of establishing ourselves or our intellect as the supreme judge of all. We acknowledge our limitations and can sit comfortably with the philosophers who describe our understanding of a situation in terms of a perspective,<sup>39</sup> seeing only part of the bigger reality.

In seeking the wisdom of Scripture, we have found practical advice on living, centred around God. It appears throughout the Old Testament, in all the sections we have examined. It includes the worship of God and study of Scripture, but recognises the limits in understanding and experience and is comfortable with the issues of God’s apparent absence and the abundance of suffering. Wisdom seeks answers, but finds paradoxes. Wisdom has much to speak into the culture of today when we recognise that simple, dismissive answers characterise the fool, and the honest hard work of seeking through an enigma suits the wise woman or man.

*Word count: 2991*

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<sup>38</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics*, 302.

<sup>39</sup> Schacht, ‘Nietzsche’, np.



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