

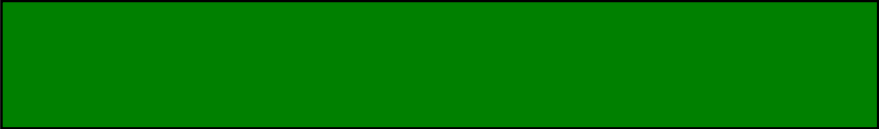
WISDOM BOOKS



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WISDOM BOOKS

Title: WISDOM BOOKS
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Adapted from Jordan Aumanns book on Spiritual Theology
Published by: The Director, Alpha Institute, Archdiocese of Tellicherry
Sandesa Bhavan, Tellicherry, 670101, Kannur, Kerala
Ph: 0490 - 2344727, 2343707
Published on: 15th August 2017
Office Assistance: Mr. Renjith KC
Bro. Jerin Marasseril
Mrs. Jeshitha Vijesh
Mrs. Renju Aneesh
Design & Layout: Midhun Thomas
Printing: Vimala Offset Press, Thalassery
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Chapter 1

Introduction

According to the traditional canonical division, the Jewish-Christian Bible (OT) is divided into three parts: Torah (the Law or Pentateuch), Neviim (Prophets), and Ketuvim (The Writings or Wisdom Books). This division seems to have existed at least from the second century B.C. because it is referred to in Sirach: "Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom... my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom..." (Prologue of Sirach). It was also known to the New Testament authors: "He (Jesus) said to them ... everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Lk 24:44).

The first five books in the Bible are known as the Law: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Law presents a theological history of Israel. It first narrates the creation of the world and the initial events in the history of humanity: God created humankind and gave them life (Gen 2:7); together with

life, he also gave them his commandment (Gen 2:17). Tempted by the vanity in creation, however, they transgressed against the commandment of God (Gen 3:6); God then punished humankind; he expelled them from the place of God's blessings (Garden of Eden). In the life that followed, estranged from God, people lost their relationship with each other. This situation eventually became miserable (see the stories of Cain and Abel, and Tower of Babel).

In order to save this humankind and to restore them to God and their fellow beings, God called one man (Abraham) and formed a people out of him (Gen 12-50).¹ God promised to give the land of Canaan to him and his descendents as an eternal possession (Gen 15:18). When time moved and Abraham died, the descendents of Abraham had to leave this land and go to Egypt as the result of a great famine. In Egypt these people subsequently became slaves of the local people under their king.

God then punished Egypt and saved them from there. From Egypt he led them by Moses to Mt Sinai and there he made a covenant with them making them his people (cf. Ex 19). Ten Commandments were given to them by God as conditions of this covenant. They were expected to go to the land and possess it with the help of their mighty God. The people however did not trust in God, and were afraid to enter into and to take possession of the Promised Land when they came to its borders (Num 13-15). They were then punished to wander in the desert for forty years. At the end of this long period of wilderness wandering, they came to the eastern borders of the land (Plains of Moab). This story is narrated in the books of Exodus through Numbers/Deuteronomy.

On their way from Sinai to Moab, God gave them all the laws that the people should obey in order to live in the land that would be given to them. These laws are scattered in Pentateuch. That is why Pentateuch is labeled as the Law. One finds these laws scattered from Ex 19 to the end of Deuteronomy. Genesis 1 - Exodus 18 prepares the historical setting in which these laws are given. That means that canonically speaking Genesis 1 - Exodus 18 gives the historical context of the Law, while Exodus 19 - Deuteronomy 34 gives the Law itself.

The second part of the Bible is called the Prophets, which is traditionally divided into two parts: Former Prophets (Joshua - 2Kings) and Latter Prophets (Isaiah - Malachi). The first part narrates the

history of Israel from their entry into the Promised Land to the exile of them from that land. After the death of Moses, Joshua led the people from the plains of Moab to the Promised Land; there they defeated the local population and possessed the land (Josh 6-12). The period of the Judges then followed, because at that time Israel had a tribal system of social life. At a certain time of this period, the people felt the need of having a king similar to the practice of other nations that surrounded them; subsequently, a king was consecrated by the Last Judge Samuel marking the beginning of a new period in the history of Israel (the monarchic period).

After the third king, Solomon (after Saul and David), this kingdom was divided into two: the northern kingdom - Israel, and the southern kingdom - Judah. In 722 B.C. the Assyrians defeated the northern kingdom, and destroyed it; the upper class people of the land were exiled to Assyria and scattered forever. The southern kingdom (Judah) continued to exist till 587 B.C. until the Babylonians defeated it and exiled its upper class population to Babylon. The former prophets mainly narrate the history of this period: from the entry into the land till the exile from there. Most of the prophetic figures lived in this period. They were mainly commentators of the Law.² The messages of some of these prophets were later collected in the form of individual books, which are called the Latter Prophets (Isaiah-Malachi). Some of the prophets lived in exile and after exile. Moses had given the laws as conditions to live in the land; the prophets interpreted these laws according to the need of their time. Like the prophets, in this period, there were also religious and political leaders who interpreted the Mosaic laws for the people (cf. Josh 1:7-8; 13:1-7; 20:1-9).

The image of God that is uncovered in the Law and the Prophets is that of a God who after having created humankind goes in search of them in their times of need. When they sinned against God by transgressing his law, God encountered them as their Judge and redeemer (Gen 3:8-24; 4:8-16); when they filled the earth with evil, he again visited them as a powerful arbitrator (6:1-22). In a later time, God scattered the arrogant humankind on the face of the earth (11:1-9). After this punishment, God chose and called one man in order to save humankind from its fallen state and to bless them (12:1-6). From him God gave birth to a people (cf. Gen 17). This nation was expected to be the mediator to bring God's blessing to humanity scattered on the face of the earth.

After their election as the people of God, in their history, God visited the chosen descendents of Abraham as their redeemer and judge. The history of God's dealings with this people is narrated and discussed in the Law and the Prophets. Throughout this narration, the people of Israel are seen as one single unit, and their history as a single group is the object of discussion. Here God does not encounter people as individuals: God forms a nation/people; he saves them, and guides them. It is true that God often speaks with individuals like Moses, Samuel, David, and Solomon; however in these divine-human meetings, the people of Israel and their future are the matter of concern. God is only guiding the nation through these leaders.

In the Law and the Prophets, one can see God as progressively revealing himself first to humanity in general and then to his chosen people (Gen 1-11 and Gen 12ff.). For the first parents, he revealed himself as the law-giver (Gen 2:17); then he revealed himself to them as their judge who punished their transgressions (Gen 3); next he showed himself to them as a compassionate God (Gen 3:21); to the murderer Cain, God revealed himself as a judge and protector (Gen 4:15); to Noah, God revealed himself as the redeemer of the righteous (Gen 6); to Moses God revealed himself as the God of the fathers (Ex 3-6) and as the law-giver (Ex 19:1-8); to the judges of Israel, he revealed himself as the redeemer from their enemies (Judg 3:12-30); to the kings of Israel he revealed himself as the emperor who controlled the earthly kings (1Sam 13:14). Israel was expected to mediate this revelation to the rest of humankind. That means that, after having created humankind on the face of the earth, God progressively revealed himself to humanity; after the first sin and consequent estrangement of humanity, God progressively revealed himself as the redeemer God and Lord of history; this is the image of God of the Law and the Prophets.

God miraculously came to humankind and through revelations unveiled to them truths about God. Man on his part has only responded to this divine initiative. The chosen people responded to God through their leaders or chosen ones (see for e.g., Noah in Gen 6:22; 7:6; Abraham in Gen 12:4; 22:1-18; Moses in Ex 4; Joshua in Josh 1; 13; Samuel in 1Sam 8:15-16). This revelatory divine interventions and human response to these were significant not only for Israel but also for humankind as a whole. For example, it was the obedience of Noah that resulted in the emergence of a new humanity when all

sinned and filled the earth with injustice (Gen 6:7-8); it was the obedience of Samuel that led to the formation of Israel as a monarchy (1Sam 8:1-7).

Summarizing the above said points one can say the following comment: the image of God that is revealed in the Law and the Prophets is that of a creator who after having created the humankind reveals progressively to them and gives them his commandments; in response, he demands obedience from them. God directly speaks with man and gives him explicit directions. This is a dogmatic type of revelation; there is no human initiative; man only responds to the things revealed to him by God. This is the notion of divine revelation found in the Law and Prophets.

Differing from what is said up to now, the biblical wisdom books give meditations and exhortations of righteous Israelite sages who meditated on the universe, humankind, and daily experiences of man. Through these reflections, these sages tried to exhort people to attain success in life and help them to face life effectively.

In ancient Israel a group (of teachers) called sages existed (cf. Is 29:14; Jer 8:8; Eccl 12:9); the precise setting of their life is not yet known to the scholars; but the wisdom books bear testimony to their existence.³ Ben Sirach makes a comparison between the profession of a wise scribe to other professions which according to him are much lower (Sir 38:24-39:11). The notion of God of the sages is slightly different from that is revealed in the Law and the Prophets. Like the authors of the Law and the Prophets, wisdom sages also consider God as the creator and preserver of the universe; however, when the sages narrate the creation activity of God, they seem to have a separate idea of creation that is different from the concept of creation unveiled in Genesis (1-2). For example, let us have a look at Proverbs 8:22-36:

²² Yahweh created me (wisdom) at the beginning

Of his work, the first of his acts of old.

²³ Ages ago I was set up, at the first,

Before the beginning of the earth.

²⁴ When there were no depths I was brought forth,

When there were no springs abounding with water.

²⁵ Before the mountains had been shaped,

Before the hills, I was brought forth.

According to this text, at the very beginning of his creating activity, God created wisdom. After her birth, wisdom assisted God in the work of creation:

- "²⁶ Before he had made the earth with its fields,
Or the first of the dust of the world.
²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there,
When he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
²⁸ When he made firm the skies above,
When he established the fountains of the deep,
²⁹ When he assigned to the sea its limit,
So that the waters might not transgress his command,
When he marked out the foundations of the earth,
³⁰ Then I was beside him, like a master workman;
And I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,
³¹ Rejoicing in his inhabited world
And delighting in the sons of men" (Prov 8:27-31).
Since wisdom knows all the secrets of creation, man should hear her voice if he wants to be wise:
³² And now, my sons, listen to me:
Happy are those who keep my ways.
³³ Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it.
³⁴ Happy is the man who listens to me,
Watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors"
(Prov 8:32-34).
Those who give heed to the voice of wisdom will find life:
"For he who finds me finds life
And obtains favor from Yahweh" (Prov 8:35)
Those who hate wisdom are lovers of death:
"He who misses me injures himself;
All who hate me love death" (Prov 8:36).

The notable thing in what is said up to now is this: according to Genesis when God created the world, he was alone, whereas according to Proverbs wisdom was the companion of God in the activity of creation. According to Genesis, light was the very first creature of God (Gen 1:2), whereas Proverbs considers wisdom as the first creature (Prov 8:22). Notably, Genesis does not speak anything about the creation of wisdom.

The Book of Wisdom (7:22-8:8) personifies wisdom and explains more clearly what wisdom really is: "she (wisdom) is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the almighty; therefore, nothing defiled gains entrance into her" (7:25); "she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness" (7:26). If one wishes to know about the works of God, he should look into wisdom. Wisdom does the works of God: "she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets" (7:27). "She glorifies her noble birth by living with God, and the Lord of all loves her" (8:3); "God loves nothing so much as the man who lives with wisdom" (7:28). According to the sages "in all wisdom there is the fulfillment of the law" (cf. Sir 19:20). Those who possess wisdom know the law of God.

If one wishes to have wisdom, he should first have fear of God (Prov 1:7; 9:10); he should also pray for wisdom, love her and seek her (Wis 7:7; 8:21; Prov 8:17). As mentioned above, according to the wisdom tradition, wisdom is the very first creature of God; she is also the fulfillment of the law of God; she is the companion of God in the activity of creation. Accordingly, the biblical wisdom books try to explain to its readers what wisdom is, and try to help them attain success in life by becoming wise.

Notably, wisdom books present a clearer idea of the activity of creation than what is narrated in Genesis. When the sage says that God created the world, he means only that God established an order in an already existing state of confusion. He thinks only of the creation of a cosmos out of a chaos. This is not *creation from nothingness*: "For your all-powerful hand, which *created the world out of formless matter*, did not lack the means to send upon them a multitude of bears, or bold lions" (Wis 11:17). Interestingly, the notion of the uncreated primeval ocean of Genesis communicates the same idea: "In (the) beginning when God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God was moving over the face of the water" (Gen 1:1-2).⁴

God made a comprehensive change to this confused state by bringing order into this chaos. This ordering of the original chaotic state is conceived by the sage as the divine activity of creation. This divinely established order (Gen 1:3-31) is visible even today. That

means that in the beginning there was only a chaotic state; then God created light and separated it from darkness; he then established the order which allows the alternate arrival of light and darkness (day and night). In the waters he established the land and then he fixed the boundaries between land and waters. Sirach communicates this notion of the sage in the following words:

"²⁴ Listen to me, my child, and acquire knowledge

And pay close attention to my words.

²⁵ I will impart discipline precisely

And declare knowledge accurately.

²⁶ When the Lord created his works from the beginning

And, in making them, determined their boundaries

²⁷ He arranged his works in an eternal order

And their dominion for all generations.

They neither hunger nor grow weary

And they do not abandon their tasks.

²⁸ They do not crowd one another

And they never disobey his word

²⁹ Then the Lord looked upon the earth

And filled it with his good things.

³⁰ With all kinds of living beings he covered its surface

And into it they must return" (Sir 16:24-30)

Every work of creation is essentially an ordering. God split the primeval ocean into two and created the heaven and earth; drying the waters, he created the land; then he established the law that the land should remain land and the waters always remain the ocean. Psalm 148 praises God for this work:

"⁵ Let them praise the name of Yahweh

For he commanded and they were created.

⁶ He established them forever and ever;

He fixed their bounds

Which cannot be passed" (Ps 148:5-6).

Similarly, God's work of creation and the establishment of the order in the universe is the object of the praise of God in Ps 104:

"¹ Bless the Lord, O my soul

O Lord my God, you are very great

You are clothed with honor and majesty

² Wrapped in light as with a garment

You stretch out the heavens like a tent

³ You set the beams of your chambers on the waters

You make the clouds your chariot

You ride on the wings of the wind

⁴ You make the winds your messengers

Fire and flame your ministers

⁵ You set the earth on its foundations

So that it shall never be shaken

⁶ You cover it with the deep as with a garment

The waters stood above the mountains

⁷ At your rebuke they flee

At the sound of your thunder they take to flight

⁸ They rose up to the mountains

Ran down to the valleys to the place

That you appointed for them

⁹ You set a boundary that they may not pass

So that they might not again cover the earth

¹⁰ You make springs gush forth in the valleys

They flow between the hills

¹¹ Giving drink to every wild animal

The wild asses quench their thirst

¹² By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation

They sing among the branches

¹³ From your lofty abode you water the mountains

The earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

¹⁴ You cause the grass to grow for the cattle

And plants for people to use,

To bring forth food from the earth

¹⁵ And wine to gladden the human heart

Oil to make the face shine, and bread

To strengthen the human heart

¹⁶ The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly

The cedars of Lebanon that he planted

- 17 In them the birds build their nests
The stork has its home in the fir trees.
- 18 The high mountains are for the wild goats
The rocks are a refuge for the conies.
- 19 You have made the moon to mark the seasons
The sun knows its time for setting.
- 20 You make darkness, and it is night
When all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
- 21 The young lions roar for their prey
Seeking their food from God
- 22 When the sun rises
They withdraw and lie down in their dens.
- 23 People go out to their work and to their labor
Until the evening.
- 24 O Lord, how manifold are your works!..." (Ps 104).

God has not only established an order in the universe but also continuously preserves this order. This divine act of preserving the established order is called providence. According to the sages, if God does not preserve and sustain this order, the world will return to its original chaotic state. This might be elucidated by means of the following example: we everyday see that the Sun rises; then it is daybreak; as the Sun moves westwards, it will become noon, evening, and eventually night. This cycle of events will continuously be repeated. As the result of this recurrence, humankind, animals, and plants can live, take rest, and retain their life. If, for example, darkness persists for a longer period of time, man might survive with the help of modern technology, but even then the plants and trees would die because they would lack nourishment.

Similarly, a river should flow continuously; a tree should grow and bear fruit; when it becomes old, it should die; a new generation should take birth from its seeds; man should be born, grow, get old, and die; a new generation should take life from him. This cycle of events continues unceasingly. According to the sages, God is the controller of these repetitions and movements. If this movement gets struck some time in history, then the world would return to its original chaotic state and would decline to be a cosmos. This seems to have happened at the time of Noah.

This divinely instituted and constantly preserved order in the universe appears to be labeled as 'wisdom' or the 'personified wisdom' in the wisdom books.⁵ This order preserved in the universe gives man knowledge about God, the creator. God has set this order in each and every creation and events that happens in the world; however, this is not always evident to man. Still, if one closely observes the universe, he might uncover the order more and more. How much one understands this and comprehends this order, so much will he be wise and grow in his knowledge about this universe. Notably, through this growing knowledge about the creation, i.e., the work of God, he will be growing in his knowledge about God. In other words, according to the sages, it is through the created universe and more precisely through the divinely instituted order in the universe that God reveals himself to humankind. The psalmist speaks about this revelation in the following way:

- "1 The heavens are telling the glory of God
And the firmament proclaims his handiwork
2 Day to day pours forth speech,
And night to night declares knowledge
3 There is no speech, nor are there words
Their voice is not heard
4 Yet their voice goes out through all the earth
And their words to the end of the world.
7 The law (order) of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
8 The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment (wisdom/order) of the Lord is clear,
Enlightening the eyes" (Ps 19:1-4, 7-8).

In his letter to the Romans, St Paul is in fact speaking about this universal and natural revelation of God: "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they (the unbelievers) are without excuse" (Rom 1:20). If one opens his eyes and looks into the universe, he can know and understand this universal self-revelation of God, because from every nook and corner of the cosmos wisdom (the divinely implanted order) calls to man. She says the following to all:

"19 Come to me, you who desire me,
 And eat your fill of my fruits
 20 For the memory of me is sweeter than honey
 And the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb
 21 Those who eat of me will hunger for more,
 And those who drink of me will thirst for more.
 22 Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame,
 And those who work with me will not sin" (Sir 24:19-22).

Since God always reveals himself through his creation, those who fail to see and recognize this God, according to the sages, are fools: "1 For all people who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know the one who exists, nor did they recognize the artisan while paying heed to his works; 2 but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world. 3 If through delight in the beauty of these things people assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. 4 And if people were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is the one who formed them. 5 For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator. 6 Yet these people are little to be blamed, for perhaps they go astray while seeking God and desiring to find him. 7 For while they live among his works, they keep searching, and they trust in what they see, because the things that are seen are beautiful. 8 Yet again, not even they are to be excused; 9 for if they had the power to know so much that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things?" (Wis 13:1-9). That means that by sincerely meditating on the creation (the empirical world), one can slowly know God's works and thus know God himself.

The sages got this conception inductively from their reflection on the universe and creation. By reflecting on individual cases they discovered general laws. Experience proves that everything in the world repeats itself: the Sun rises and sets everyday; man is born as a child; then he grows to his full stature, becomes old, and then dies; the trees give seeds; they will grow into trees, and then will again give seeds; man sows, then plants grow; then he reaps; if they do not

grow, his plans will be shattered and his life will become tragic. The general experience shows that the expected order in the universe is constantly retained. Notably, to maintain any such order or constant movement, there should be an agent that preserves and enforces these movements. This moving agent is labeled by the wisdom sages as God. Biblical wisdom tradition tries to speak about this God who is revealed to man through his daily experience; he is the God who controls the orderly movement of the universe. Wisdom sages were seekers of the God of creation.

Being a knowledge about God (about the creator of the universe and its preserver) that is based on the day-to-day experience and revelation given to man through the nature (Rom 1:20), wisdom thinking and wisdom reflections were not particular to Israel alone. Man, whether an Israelite or a non-Israelite, is a creature of God, and being rational, he generally has a basic disposition to seek out his creator. Actually, wisdom tradition gives the history of human search for the creator. The universe is bigger and greater than the nation of Israel, and the experience of humankind is common to Israel as well as the non-Israelites. Accordingly, all the ancient peoples searched for God and shared their reflections about the Creator God based on their experience. The biblical wisdom tradition is thus a part of and contribution of Israel to the general wisdom reflection of humanity. Revealing this universal characteristic of wisdom tradition, the personified wisdom will make the following comment:

"3 I (wisdom) came forth from the mouth of the Most High
 And covered the earth like a mist.
 4 I dwelt in the highest heavens
 And my throne was in a pillar of cloud.
 5 Alone I compassed the vault of heaven
 And traversed the depths of the abyss.
 6 Over waves of the sea, over all the earth
 And over every people and nation I have held sway"

(Sir 24:3-6).

In fact among the neighbors of Israel, especially in Egypt and Mesopotamia, wisdom thinking was very prevalent and this gave birth to a vast amount of literature.⁶ Comparative literature to the biblical wisdom tradition can also be found in the Semitic region. A short discussion on some of these texts might be useful.

Proverbs seem to have appropriated several themes and sayings from the neighboring cultures of Israel. For example Prov 30 (cf. verse 1) is said to be sayings of Agur son of Jakeh of Massa. Massa is in north-west Arabia (cf. Gen 25:14; 1Chr 1:30). Similarly, Prov 31 is said to be the words of Lemuel, king of Massa, the words which his mother taught him. These titles show that even the sacred author was conscious of the international character of the wisdom that he records.

In Egypt, many "teachings" or "instructions" (*sebayit*) have been handed down over a period of about 2500 years, from that of Prince Hardjedef (or Djedefhor of the Fifth Dynasty) down to the Insinger Papyrus, which dates from the Ptolemaic period (323-300 B.C.). Generally a teacher, or a high official, or a king was thought to hand down rules of conduct, which cover areas such as truth, integrity, generosity, moderation, proper and timely speech, the need to "hear," and the need of having correct relationships with officials, women, one's household, and friends. The model behavior is silence, which is a sign of self-control and thoughtfulness, which implies that the person can master the situation, in contrast to the rash, and impetuous person. All these ideals are held together by the Egyptian concept *ma'at*, which designates order, truth, and justice. More important among the Egyptian instructions are those associated with Ptahhotep, Merikare, Amenemhet, Ani, Amenemope, Onkhsheshonqy, and the Papyrus Insinger.⁷

Pointing to the contrast between the righteous and the wicked is characteristic of Proverbs (cf. e.g., Prov 10-15); this characteristic is visible not only in the Egyptian wisdom literature but also in the Aramaic Wisdom of Ahiqar.⁸ Commentators often refer to the parallel elements found between Prov 23:13-14 and Ahiqar lines 81-82.⁹ Notably, this proverb comes immediately after a series of parallels from Amenemope (Prov 22:17-23:11).¹⁰ Scholars would say that Proverbs provides us with the wisdom of the Ancient Near East in the Israelite and Jewish form.¹¹

Similarly, the problem of the suffering of the innocent people (theodicy) was the object of reflection of sages of all the nations; the Book of Job is the Israelite representative this tradition. The main character of the Book of Job comes from Uz (Job 1:1) which might either be in Syria (Gen 10:23; 20:21) or most probably in Edom (cf. Lam 4:21; Gen 34:28)¹² pointing to the international vision of the

biblical author. There are a number of comparable works to Job that come from Mesopotamia that discuss the problem of the suffering of the innocent and of divine justice. For example, "I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom" (*Ludlul bel nemeqi*; cf. *ANET*, 596-600), "Man and His God" (cf. *ANET*, 589-591), and Babylonian Theodicy (called The Dialogue about Human Misery; cf. *ANET*, 601-604). In the first two works, the situation of the sufferer is narrated at the beginning; then he will be restored through the intervention of the Babylonian God Marduk. In the Babylonian Theodicy the theme is a sufferer and a sympathetic (unlike Job's "friends") listener. The dialogue between them covers many topics that reflect upon the justice of the gods. According to the Mesopotamians, the reason of human suffering was the capricious decision of gods who wanted humans suffer.¹³ In the Book of Job, by contrast, suffering has got an instructional value which we will discuss in this work.

A work similar to *Ludlul bel nemeqi* was uncovered in Ugarit as well showing the presence of similar theological reflections in Canaan as well.¹⁴ These works which predate the biblical books have surely prepared the background for biblical wisdom literature and especially for Job.

One of the enigmatic biblical books is Qoheleth. John Day has persuasively proved that the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic (X. iii, 6-14) has striking comparison with the advice of Qoheleth on life (cf. Eccl 9:7-9). In fact Qoheleth might be classified as having a literary genre which thinks of life as vanity; the (Babylonian) Dialogue of Pessimism (cf. *ANET*, 600-601) similarly declares the traditional wisdom theme 'vanity of vanities.' S. Burkes has studied Egyptian biographies which negate positive sentiments about death and afterlife within earlier Egyptian tradition and invites to enjoy the present life because this is all man can expect.¹⁵ The reason for this is the general Ancient Near Eastern conception that gods have created humankind for the divine advantage and no freedom of choice had been given to man.¹⁶ Scholars also have noted parallelism between Insinger Papyrus and Qoheleth and Ben Sirach.¹⁷

In Proverbs and in other biblical wisdom writings often occur sayings involving a graded numerical sequence (cf. Prov 6:16-19; 30:15-31; Job 5:19-22; 30:18-19; 33:14-22; 40:5; Eccl 11:2; Sir 23:16; 25:7-11; 26:5, 28; 50:25-26). Similar graded numerical sayings were said to be

very frequent in the Ancient Near East. For example, Wisdom of Ahiqar has one numerical saying of this type in lines 92-93a which is comparable to Prov 6:16-19;¹⁸ in the Ugaritic Baal-Cycle one finds the following example:

Two sacrifices Baal hates
 Three, the river on the clouds:
 A sacrifice of shame, a sacrifice of meanness
 And a sacrifice of the lewdness of the handmaids"¹⁹

In the biblical wisdom tradition, fear of God is thought to be central in the life of a wise man (cf. Prov 1:7, 29; 3:7; etc.; Eccl 3:14; 8:12; 12:13; Sir 1:12, 14, 16, 18; Job 28:28; 1:9; 6:14; 15:4; Ps 2:11); fear of God prolongs life (Prov 10:27; 19:23; 22:4). The idea of 'fear' is repeatedly taught in the Babylonian wisdom literature as well (see *Ludlul bel nemeqi* ii, 18, 25, 32; Babylonian Theodicy line 22; Counsels of Wisdom lines 143-147; the Shamash Hymn line 165, and Proverbs ii, 11-14). See this example from the Counsels of Wisdom 143-147:

Reverence begets favor,
 Sacrifice prolongs life,
 And prayer atones for guilt.
 He who fears the gods is not slighted by [...]
 He who fears the Anunnaki extends [his days].²⁰

Being sharers of the same way of thinking, biblical wisdom writings have much in common with the abovementioned literature. Being aware of this global character of wisdom thinking, great sages of Israel promoted the learning of the reflections of other nations too:

"¹ ... He who devotes himself to the study
 Of the law of the Most High
 Will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients
 And will be concerned with prophecies
² He will preserve the discourse of notable men
 And penetrate the subtleties of parables
³ He will seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs
 And be at home with the obscurities of parables
⁴ He will serve among great men and appear before rulers
 He will travel through the lands of foreign nations
 For he tests the good and the evil among men" (Sir 39:1-4).

Now let us have a look at the origin of wisdom tradition in Israel. According to the biblical history sons of Jacob were slaves in Egypt. They were liberated by God which was followed by 40 years of desert wanderings. Finally they came to the land promised by God. There they lived as twelve independent tribes. Till this time education was usually given in the families and proverbs, stories, songs and similar techniques were the main means of teaching (e.g., Deut 32:7; Prov 4:3).

Later the tribal Israel would emerge as a monarchy giving birth to a great administrative system. In this system, they needed learned people to make economic and political transactions, and other communications with the neighboring nations (cf. 2King 18:26). Israel was now forced to send people abroad and teach them writing and reading or to establish schools in the land itself. Bible points to the fact that Israel had professional scribes like the other neighboring nations (cf. 1Chr 27:32-33; Prov 25:1; Sir 38:24-39:11; see also Ez 28:3-4; Jer 49:7 which speak about the wise men of Edom and Egypt). In Sumerian city-states writing was taught in schools even from third millennium onwards.²¹ These students needed lessons and objects of learning. Those who went abroad had to learn the then existing literature of the neighbors of Israel (Egyptians and Mesopotamians). As they learned these literature and their moral reflections, they also influenced the thinking of the Israelites. It is now known that several materials are commonly shared by the Bible and the other Ancient Near Eastern Literature. As these students learned the literature and thoughts of those people, they also learned the high moral thoughts of those peoples; being deep and valid reflections on life, they personalized these moral thoughts. When these students were about to put in writing their moral teachings, they were already influenced by these great thoughts; the resulting moral lessons are visible in the Bible which are often similar to the reflections of the neighbors of Ancient Israel. For example, the so-called sayings of the wise (Prov 22:17-24:22) are said to be similar to the exhortations of Pharaoh Amenemope (1250-1000 B.C.).²²

As already said above, modern studies show that biblical wisdom books are similar to the other wisdom literature of the Ancient Near East. This also means that wisdom literature generally addresses a wide range of audience than the people of Israel. Wisdom teachings originate from the everyday experience of people; they are tips that help people to master life; they are practical advice for successful

living; they are valid for all people indifferent of nationality and creed. Wisdom literature does not generally discuss issues of religious or national nature. They are concerned with human experience which is normally the same in all nations and cultures.

Wisdom literature, being the common heritage of humanity, does not give importance to any national history. As a result in the Wisdom Books, there is no place for narrating the history of the redemption of Israel as well. The basic interest of the wisdom literature is the search for the Creator God who sustains his creation.

We have already seen that in the universe there is a God-established order (Prov 8:22-30). This order is the work of God and precisely the work of the divine wisdom; the personification of this order is the lady wisdom found in the wisdom literature. In fact, according to the thinking of the sages this order is not confined to the external empirical world alone. Similar to the visible order in the empirical world, there is a parallel order in the spiritual and moral world. God according to the sage is not only the creator of the universe; he is also a righteous God. Being the creator of the universe he has implanted an order in the universe; similarly, being a righteous God he has given an inner-spiritual order in the moral world as well. Man has to learn this order from his experience and live accordingly. This order is labeled as the 'way' (*derek*) or 'way of life' (*'orah*) in wisdom tradition (cf. Prov 2:19; 5:6; 6:23; 15:24). The way itself is the conduct which incarnates the teachings of the sages: honesty, diligence (Prov 10:4; 26:14), self-control (14:17; 15:1), a sense of responsibility (10:26; 27:23-27) and so on. This is the way of character formation.²³ God has implanted this ethical order in the universe in such a way that man as the only intelligent creature should understand and obey this divine law. As the consequence of this ethical order, there emerges an act-consequence link; the righteous who follow this order will be rewarded by God, whereas the evildoers will be punished:

"The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked,
But he blesses the abode of the righteous" (Prov 3:33).
"Be assured, the wicked will not go unpunished,
But those who are righteous will escape" (Prov 11:21);
"The perverse get what their ways deserve,
And the good, what their deeds deserve" (Prov 14:14).

"He who digs a pit will fall into it,
And a stone will come back upon him who starts it rolling"
(26:27)

It is to be remembered that even before the Ten Commandments were given to Israel (2nd Millennium), humankind had become conscious of several similar moral laws like the fifth and eighth commandment. According to the wisdom sages, even though the Creator-God has given his moral law to humankind, God has not taught this law by means of any explicit and direct dogmatic revelation. Each individual person has to learn this law from his own experience just as he progressively learns from experience about the (visible) order of things that God has established in the empirical world. The lady wisdom in the Bible is the personification of this inner moral order:

²⁶ When the Lord created his works from the beginning
And, in making them, determined their boundaries
²⁷ He arranged his works in an eternal order
And their dominion for all generations
They neither hunger nor grow weary
And they do not abandon their tasks.
²⁸ They do not crowd one another,
And they never disobey his word.
²⁹ Then the Lord looked upon the earth,
And filled it with his good things.
³⁰ With all kinds of living beings he covered its surface,
And into it they must return" (Sir 16:26-30).
"She (Wisdom) reaches mightily from one end of the earth
To the other, and she orders all things well" (Wis 8:1).

In order to know more and more about this inner ethical order of things man has to acquire divine wisdom, because only a wise man can recognize wisdom. So the sage makes the following prayer to God:

¹⁹ With you is wisdom,
She who knows your works and was present
When you made the world
She understands what is pleasing in your sight
And what is right according to your commandments

¹⁰ Send her forth from the holy heavens
 And from the throne of your glory send her
 That she may labor at my side
 And that I may learn what is pleasing to you" (Wis 9:9-10).

Since God wishes to reveal his law to each and every human being personally, he tries to teach him through his own experience what his law is. That means that the law of God is hidden in the life experiences, events, and all occurrences in the world. A wise man should always seek this divine law in all the events and personal experiences; he has to be attentive in all his doings in such a way that he learns something from these experiences (cf. Prov 8:17; Ps 19:1-18; Sir 6:18-37). In other words, one has to learn from his experience how he is rewarded by God for his good actions and how God punishes his evil works. In order to understand this, one has to analyze all his life-experiences. If one tries to do this, he will gradually become wise and will be capable enough to acquire great wisdom. In his work of creation, the righteous and wise God made the chaotic world inhabitable by bringing an order into it. A righteous and wise man has to discover this order as much as he can so that his life would be closer to the divine design of human life.

A similar notion of wisdom existed already in Egypt. The Egyptians had personified the material and spiritual order in the universe and labeled it *ma'at*, which was thought to be a goddess and daughter of God Re. She is the divinely established order in the universe.²⁴ How far can one adjust his life according to this universal order, so far will he find success in life. To find success in life one should be well ordered; if he fails to comprehend and modify his life according to the universal order, his life would be a chaos and a failure. That was the Egyptian thinking.

We have already mentioned that if one closely observes the universe he can discover the order/wisdom in the external world; similarly, if he sincerely analyses his life experiences, he would find wisdom. This observation and analyses should however be done with great fear of God, because fear of God is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10). If one looks into the world with a sincere desire to acquire wisdom, he will be guided by wisdom beyond the visible things, and will be taught more about the inner order that God has implanted in the created things. He will have a kind of intuitive knowledge:

"I love them that love me;
 And those that seek me early shall find me" (Prov 8:17).

He will comprehend more wisdom, knowing more about the mysteries of the works of God; he will be having more knowledge of God:

³ She (Wisdom) glorifies her noble birth
 By living with God, and the Lord of all loves her.
⁴ For she is an initiate in the knowledge of God,
 And an associate in his works" (Wis 8:3-4).

Seeking wisdom and practicing righteousness are comparable; if one is righteous, he will become wise, perfect, and will know more about God:

⁷ And if anyone loves righteousness,
 Her (wisdom's) labors are virtues;
 For she teaches self-control and prudence,
 Justice and courage;
 Nothing in life is more profitable for mortals than these.
⁸ And if anyone longs for wide experience,
 She knows the things of old, and infers the things to come;
 She understands turns of speech
 And the solutions of riddles;
 She has foreknowledge of signs and wonders
 And of the outcome of seasons and times" (Wis 8:7-8).

In the wisdom tradition, this wisdom/order is generally referred to as the law of God. It is a way of living rather than the Pentateuch:

"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul
 The decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple"
 (Ps 19:7).

¹¹ Blessed is the man who walks
 Not in the counsel of the wicked
 Nor stands in the way of sinners
 Nor sits in the seat of scoffers
² But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
 And on his law he meditates day and night" (Ps 1:1-2).
 "I delight to do thy will, O my God;

Your law is within my heart" (Ps 40:8).
 "Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
 Who walk in the law of the Lord" (Ps 119:1).
 "Open my eyes,
 That I may behold wondrous things out of your law"
 (Ps 119:18; cf. also v 29, 34, 44, 51, 53, 55 etc.).
 "He who keeps the law is a wise son
 But a companion of gluttons shames his father" (Prov 28:7).
 God constantly preserves this law:
 "The eyes of the Lord keep watch over knowledge"
 (Prov 8:22).

Biblical wisdom books try to help people to discover the law and the God who wants to reveal himself through the personal experiences of the individuals; therefore the sage says that, "an inexperienced person knows few things" (Sir 34:10). God has created this marvelous universe; he has also created humankind as free and intelligent beings. Using their God-given intelligence, and other faculties, they should reflect and meditate on this wonderful creation of God and through this reflection they should understand and find their creator. This is the basic conception of the wisdom sages about man. As a result, the idea of revelation of God that is given through the Law and the Prophets and the revelation given through wisdom tradition, although speaks about the same God, are different.

The Law and the Prophets conceive God as one who comes in search of Israel and directs their history revealing himself to them through miraculous historical interventions. God is primarily the redeemer of Israel and the revelation given is confined to the boundaries of the nation of Israel. God as conceived by the wisdom tradition however is a God, who through the orderly movements in the universe, tries to reveal himself to any human being who is in search of the creator of the universe. Here the important duties one is expected to do are personal seeking and analyses of one's own experiences in life.

The Law and the Prophets present the God who intervenes in the history of the nation and guides it, while wisdom tradition presents the God who intervenes in the personal life of any individual and personally guides his history. An example might elucidate this: according to Ps 19 (Wisdom Psalm) the whole universe is declaring the glory of God,

but there is no word or voice heard; through this revelation, the creation is teaching the law (wisdom) of God; by contrast, according to Ex 19 (Law and Prophet) God makes a self-revelation by coming down on Mt Sinai; he explicitly shows his glory to Israel and clearly defines his laws. This is the difference between the revelation in the wisdom literature and revelation of God in the Law and the Prophets. Accordingly, the Law and the Prophets request us to learn about God by looking into the history of redemption, whereas the wisdom tradition demands us to learn about God basically from analyzing our own experience.

In other words, on Mt Sinai making a covenant with Israel, God chose them as his people and gave them his laws. Israel should learn and teach the whole humankind this law of God; this is the divine project. The Law and the Prophets look into the world through the prism of the covenant on Mt Sinai; wisdom tradition, on the contrary, having no significance to national conceptions of God, first looks into the universe, which is the handwork of God; from there it tries to know who God really is. The sage is trying to look to God through the prism of wisdom (law) that God has established in the universe. The covenant of God with humanity in Noah might be seen as a basis for this conception. Law and the Prophets try to comprehend the God of the history of redemption and the divine laws given in the past; wisdom literature helps one to understand the God who reveals himself to each individual even today. A life corresponding to this revelation will lead one to success.

The Law and the Prophets speak of the God who goes in search of man; wisdom tradition speaks of man who goes in search of his creator. By analyzing and learning from his experiences, he is trying to learn more about his creator and thus trying to reach him. His basic premise is the following: "From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator" (Wis 13:5).

We have already seen that wisdom is acquired through the analysis of the experiences of man. The quantity and variety of experiences in the world however are so vast, different, and innumerable, while the life of a human being is very short. This means that one cannot comprehend everything in the universe in his short life-time or can have experience of everything in the short period of life given to him:

"28 The first man did not know wisdom fully,
Nor will the last one comprehend her.

29 For her thoughts are more abundant than the sea,
And her counsel deeper than the great abyss"
(Sir 24:28-29).

One has to learn therefore not only from his own experience, but also from the experiences of other people and the experiences of the generations that lived before him. He should give heed to the experience-based exhortations of the past generations:

"¹⁷ Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise
And apply your mind to my knowledge

¹⁸ For it will be pleasant if you keep them within you
If all of them are ready on your lips" (Prov 22:17-18).

"⁸ Hear, my child, your father's instruction,
And do not reject your mother's teaching;

⁹ For they are a fair garland for your head,
And pendants for your neck"
(Prov 1:8-9; cf. also 4:1-9, 10, 20; 5:1).

The sages learned, respected, and collected all the wise exhortations of the ancient generations because they had helped those generations to face life successfully; such knowledge should also be useful for the modern generations.

In the Bible there are seven books that have stored the words and exhortations of the sages: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom of Solomon, and Sirach. The general characteristics of the materials that we discussed up to now might be summarized in the following points:

1. God of wisdom tradition is mainly the creator and preserver of the universe; man is therefore seeking God by seeking the mystery of creation.

2. The sages are seeking the ways to make life successful and the manner of behavior through which man can be blameless before his creator. They are giving fundamental orientation for practical life.

3. Since the problems of man are evaluated from a global point of view, the history of the nation of Israel and their problems do not get much importance in these books.

4. Unlike the Law and the Prophets, in these books there is no discussion about the redemptive work of the God of Israel.

5. In these books the sages are trying to find causes for the problems in the day-to-day life of people, because they believe that through all the experiences of people, God is revealing a divine thought to humanity. They would also like to find reasonable answers to explain human suffering.

In the coming pages we are going to discuss briefly all the seven biblical wisdom books. The discussion will not be moving forward following the order given in the LXX followed by modern translations. In a different way, each book will be discussed in its historico-theological context following the approximate date of its origin. That means that the books will be discussed in the order of their historical origin. This will help us to understand the theological development that happens in the successive books. Psalms will first be discussed because this book functions as a link between the Law and the Prophets, and wisdom books.

End Notes

¹ Cf. A. Tharekadavil, "The Call of Abraham and Formation of the Chosen People," *BibBh* 30 (2003), 115-162.

² Cf. J.J. Schmitt, "Pre-exilic Hebrew Prophecy," *ABD* V, 485.

³ Cf. J. Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament: The Ordering of Life in Israel and in Early Judaism*, New York et al., Oxford University, OBS, 1983, 7-11; P. de Boer, "The Counsellor," in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, ed. M. Noth and D. W. Thomas, Leiden, VTSup 3, 1955, 42-71; R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom in the Old Testament," *ABD* VI, 921.

⁴ According to Hebrew syntax, the first sentence of the Bible should be translated in this way; cf. A. Niccacci, *Lettura, sintattica della prosa Ebraica*, Jerusalem, SBF Analecta 31, FPP, 1991.

⁵ Cf. R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom - Theses and Hypotheses," in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honour of Samuel Terrien*, ed. J.G. Gammie, et al., Missoula, 1978, 35-36; H. Gese, *Lehre und Wirklichkeit in der alten Weisheit*, Tübingen, 1958, 198-199.

⁶ Cf. W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, Oxford, 1960; "Some New Babylonian Wisdom Literature," in J. Day, Gordon, R.P. and William-son H.G.M., eds, *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J.A. Emerton*, Cambridge, Cambridge University 1995, 30-42; M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Los Angeles, 1973; J. D. Ray, "Egyptian Wisdom Literature," in *ibid.*, 17-29; J.C. Greenfield, "Wisdom of Ahiqar," in J. Day, Gordon, R.P. and Williamson H.G.M., eds, *ibid.*, 43-54

- ⁷ Cf. B.T. Arnold and B.E. Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2002; R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom in the Old Testament," *ABD VI*, 928-929; H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, New York, Harper Torch Book, 1961, 54.
- ⁸ Ahiqar line 167 refers to the righteous, while line 168 refers to the wicked; cf. J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom," 63.
- ⁹ "13 Do not withhold discipline from a child; If you beat him with a rod, he will not die. 14 If you beat him with the rod You will save his life from Sheol (Prov 23:13-14)."Spare not your son from rod; Otherwise can you have him [from wickedness?] If I beat you, my son, you will not die; But if I leave you alone [you will not live]" (*Ahiqar*, 81-82).
- ¹⁰ Cf. The discussion on comparative elements between Proverbs and Semitic literature in J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom of Israel and its Appropriation in the Book of Proverbs," in J. Day, Gordon, R.P. and Williamson H.G.M., eds, *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in*
- ¹³ Cf. R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom in the Old Testament," *ABD VI*, 929.
- ¹⁴ Cf. J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom," 57; W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, Oxford, 1960, 21-91.
- ¹⁵ S. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*, Atlanta, SBL DS 170, Scholars Press, 1999.
- ¹⁶ Cf. J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom," 59-61; W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 36-42.
Honour of J.A. Emerton, Cambridge, Cambridge University 1995, 62-63 (55-70); J.D. Ray, *Egyptian Wisdom literature*, " 23-25.
- ¹¹ Cf. W.H. Schmidt, *Old Testament Introduction*, Mumbai, St Pauls, 2002, 371-373.
- ¹² Cf. J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom," 56.
- ¹³ Cf. R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom in the Old Testament," *ABD VI*, 929.
- ¹⁴ Cf. J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom," 57; W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, Oxford, 1960, 21-91.
- ¹⁵ S. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*, Atlanta, SBL DS 170, Scholars Press, 1999.
- ¹⁶ Cf. J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom," 59-61; W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 36-42.
- ¹⁷ Cf. J. D. Ray, "Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 27-28; J.T. Sanders, *Ben Sirach and Demotic Wisdim*, Chico, 1983.
- ¹⁸ Cf. J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom," 64-65.
- ¹⁹ Cf. J. Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament*, 32-33.
- ²⁰ Cf. J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom," 67.
- ²¹ Cf. J. Blenkinsopp, *Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament*, 12.
- ²² Cf. V.M. Matthews, and D.C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 2nd ed., New York, Paulist, 1997, 274-282; *ANET* 421-424
- ²³ Cf. R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom in the Old Testament," *ABD VI*, 925-926
- ²⁴ H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, New York, Harper Torch Book, 1961, 62-72.

Chapter 2

Psalms

The Psalter is a small biblical book that contains 150 songs, which are called psalms. These songs were generally sung accompanied by musical instruments. In the book these songs do not seem to be ordered or arranged. The word "psalm" comes from the Greek *psalms* which means a song of praise. In the Psalter the word *psalmos* occur often as part of the title. The verbal form of the root is *psallo* means to sing. In the Hebrew Bible the Psalter had no special name; the rabbinic tradition later called it *Sefer Tehillim*, or *Tehillim*, which means (Book of) Songs of Praise.

When counting the psalms the LXX differs from the Hebrew Bible as given below:

Hebrew Masoretic Text	Septuaginta
Ps 1-8	Ps 1-8
9-10	9
11-113	10-112
114-115	113
116:1-9	114
116:10-19	115
117-146	116-145
147:1-11	146
147:12-20	147
148-150	148-150
	151

According to the tradition, King David composed all the psalms. The heading *mismor to David* (Psalm of David) appears as the title of 57 psalms. According to the Ancient Middle Eastern literary tradition people used to write literary works and, for the sake of authenticity, attributed these works to famous persons. At that period people considered the effective diffusion of ideas as more important than publicity to the real authors. By attributing their works to important and famous persons, their works got more readers and thus these works were considered more authentic. The psalms known in the name of David (e.g., Ps 11), or Asaf (Ps 78-83; cf. 1Chr 16:2-5; 2Chr 5:3), or Korah (Ps 42-49), may not thus necessarily come from these referred to persons.

Although all the psalms are traditionally attributed to King and Singer David, if the periods of their origin are given serious consideration, they seem to have derived not from a single period in history but come from different periods beginning from the early days of the history of Israel; they reflect different historical settings and the problems faced by the Israelites in a long period that lasted for several centuries. Psalms have been prayers of Israelites of this long period. Although we do not know much about the period when the Israelites began to sing psalms, we almost know the end of the period when the Psalter got the final shape: since we have a translation of the Psalter in LXX we would reasonably conclude that the Psalter was almost fixed before the translation of the Greek LXX (3rd- 2nd century B.C.).

As already mentioned above, the psalms originated from various points and settings that are spread throughout the history of Israel. A good number of psalms seem to have originated as individual prayers and later became a prayer of the community. In that case a psalm can be compared to some of the prayers people now use of which the origin we know to a certain extent. For example, when he was surrounded by competition and quarrels, St Francis of Assisi prayed to God to make him his instrument of peace:

Based on the content and literary genre, scholars generally classify psalms into nine groups: Laments, Hymns of Praise, Songs of Thanksgiving, Songs of Confidence or Trust, Zion Songs, Royal Psalms of Yahweh as the King, Royal Songs, Wisdom Songs, and Prophetic Exhortations.

One might ask the following question: psalms are either prayers,

or instructions, or praises; if so how can they be part of the revealed word of God? Psalms are taken as word of God because they give us the dispositions and prayers of the righteous people in diverse situations in life. These are prayers and praises that emerged from the mind of true believers in concrete situations. As a result, the study of each psalm in its historical, cultural, and theological setting is very important. Each psalm unveils a unique life setting. Our life situations are diverse and similarly complex. Psalms teach us how we are to react and respond to these differing situations by showing us the example of the psalmist in similar situations. One who knows all the psalms and knows what he prays, knows what to pray and how to face the diverging situations in life. Jesus, who prays Ps 22 amidst his suffering on the cross, is a good example of such a believer. That should be the disposition of a true faithful.

One might also ask another similar question: Although the Psalter is a mini-Bible and it contains only a limited number of wisdom psalms, why is it that it is considered to be a wisdom book? Wisdom books give accounts and reflections of man who is in search of his creator. For the sage human experience is the basis of revelation. Psalms have originated from the experiences of sages and devotees. They are not dogmatic communications of God's message. Since the Book of Psalms contains human experience and human response, it has become part of the wisdom tradition.

For a detailed discussion on the book of Psalms please see the separate volume of the Alpha Theological Commentary (Vol. 16)

Chapter 3

Proverb

When man began to live as settled groups and social life developed, people needed more refined way of life and behavior that made co-existence possible (cf. Prov 25:28). This resulted in the need of formation of the individuals in the family itself. In the beginning parents were fully responsible for the training of their children. People used to live as joint families. The members of these individual families used to sit together (may be in the evenings) and speak communicating valuable messages to the new generations.³⁷ They gave a great treasure of insights that they gained from wide experience. In the background of such experience, people reflected on rules of exemplary conduct, and they were formulated in maxims which combined practical and moral learning.³⁸ This seems to be the origin of proverbs which contains the oldest wisdom in Israel:

- "² That men may know wisdom and instruction,
Understand words of insight,
- ³ Receive instruction in wise dealing,
Righteousness, justice, and equity;
- ⁴ That prudence may be given to the simple,
Knowledge and discretion to the youth..."
(Prov 1:2-4).

The older generations used to communicate to the younger generations all wisdom that they had not only in the form of proverbs or sayings (cf. e.g., Prov 26:27) but also in the form of images or similes (cf. e.g., Prov 26:11, 14), numerical sayings (cf. e.g., Prov 30:18-19), comparisons (cf. e.g., Prov 15:16), exhortations (cf. e.g., Prov 24:19), short stories, riddles, poems and so on. In such occasions, all the subjects that man is concerned with like the use of speech (Prov 18:7) agriculture, education (Prov 13:24; 29:19), respect towards parents (10:1), respect towards the king (16:12), family relationships (12:4; 19:14), social life (11:14), and ways to acquire knowledge (1:7) became objects of discussion. The same communication was done when schools originated in Israel under the leadership of sages and kings.³⁹ With the invention of writing and the systematization of education, many of these proverbs and other insights were collected and put in writing. This must have later served as a kind of text book for education.

The sages were basically searching for God who revealed himself through everyday experience of man. One of their basic concerns was to find out the reasons for the day-to-day sufferings; they also sought solutions for these sufferings. In understanding the reflections of the sages in Israel, Proverbs is a very important book. In its present form it appears as a handbook for moral and religious instruction compiled by older and experienced generation for the younger generations so that they become wise and godly (cf. Prov 1:2-7). It contains the wisdom of generations which the public carried in their heads. These sayings were first transmitted as oral sayings and then they were collected, written and subsequently reedited several times.⁴⁰

Content, Method of Teaching, and Structure of the Book

We have already said that the sayings in Proverbs are instructions for practical life. In the day-to-day life man should be guided by wisdom. The sayings in Proverbs were the result of long reflection on practical life by the sages:

"The sign of a happy heart is a cheerful face,
But to devise proverbs requires painful thinking" (Sir 13:26).

Not only that the sayings in Proverbs give instructions and reflections on almost all spheres of life, but also that it teaches very important things through short, sweet, and weighty sayings and aphorisms that are easily remembered by their terse point. These sayings are assertive,

apparently self-explanatory, and they teach things as though they are self-authenticating; they are brief and concise and often there are plays on words; comparison is one of the basic characteristics of these sayings.⁴¹ Pointing to the content and value of these sayings, scholars define a proverb as "the wit of one, the wisdom of many." In them simplicity and novelty are united with inspiration. They are often narratives in nutshell. See the following examples:

"Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit,
But righteousness delivers from death" (10:2).
"Like vinegar to the teeth, and smoke to the eyes,
So are the lazy to their employers" (10:26)
"Whoever belittles another lacks sense,
But an intelligent person remains silent" (11:12).
"The human mind plans the way,
But the Lord directs the steps" (16:9).
"Do not be among winebibbers,
Or among gluttonous eaters of meat;
The drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty,
And drowsiness will clothe them with rags" (23:20-21).
"Like somebody who takes a passing dog by the ears
Is one who meddles in the quarrel of another" (26:17).
"Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming,
But who is able to stand before jealousy?" (27:4).

Even though translation cannot give the original beauty of the Hebrew sayings, they are still attractive and striking.

Major part of the book consists of simple proverbs which are generally composed of two parts (e.g., Prov 19:21) which is often visible in Proverbs 10-31. Very often things are juxtaposed, without having a verb (e.g., "He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son; he who sleeps during harvest is disgraceful" - Prov 10:5). Unfortunately, this style is not generally evident in translations. Through this method, the author puts things in parallelism either synonymous or antithetic (in order to show the contrast).⁴²

Man who is born as a child should progressively attain wisdom not only through his personal experiences but also from the experiences of others. In order to help young in-experienced people to attain

wisdom, the sages formulated short sayings and instructions in order to teach their disciples. For example see the following:

³⁰ I passed by the field of one who was lazy,
By the vineyard of a stupid person;
³¹ And see, it was all overgrown with thorns;
The ground was covered with nettles,
And its stone wall was broken down.
³² Then I saw and considered it;
I looked and received instruction.
³³ A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to rest,
³⁴ And poverty will come upon you like a robber,
And want, like an armed warrior" (Prov 24:30-34).
¹⁵ Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,
But the rod of discipline drives it far from him" (Prov 22:15).
Those who attain wisdom will understand the purpose of human existence and he will gain success in this world created by God:
¹² The eyes of the Lord keep watch over knowledge,
But he overthrows the words of the faithless.
The lazy person says, "There is a lion outside!
I shall be killed in the streets!"
¹⁴ The mouth of a loose woman is a deep pit;
He with whom the Lord is angry falls into it" (Prov 23:12-14).
¹³ My child, eat honey, for it is good,
And the drippings of the honeycomb
are sweet to your taste.
¹⁴ Know that wisdom is such to your soul;
If you find it, you will find a future,
And your hope will not be cut off" (Prov 24:13-14)

Since the sages were trying to help people to attain success in life, they tried to give instructions on commendable behavior in all imaginable circumstances in life. Man should know for certain the manner of behavior in all the circumstances. Some of the proverbs quoted below will show the variety of points that Proverbs discuss in relation to the various situations in life:

"The blessing of the Lord makes rich,
And he adds no sorrow with it" (10:22).
"The fear of the Lord prolongs life,
But the years of the wicked will be short" (10:27).
"The righteous know the needs of their animals,
But the mercy of the wicked is cruel" (12:10).
"The perverse get what their ways deserve,
And the good, what their deeds deserve" (14:14).
"The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life,
So that one may avoid the snares of death" (14:27).
"Righteousness exalts a nation,
But sin is a reproach to any people" (14:34).
"Without counsel, plans go wrong,
But with many advisers they succeed" (15:22).
"Those who are greedy for unjust gain
Make trouble for their households,
But those who hate bribes will live" (15:27).
"The mind of the wise makes their speech judicious,
And adds persuasiveness to their lips" (16:23).
"A perverse man spreads strife,
And a whisperer separates close friends" (16:28).
"Before destruction one's heart is haughty,
But humility goes before honor" (18:12).
"If one gives answer before he hears,
It is his folly and shame" (18:13).
"The lot puts an end to disputes
And decides between powerful contenders" (18:18).
"5 A false witness will not go unpunished,
And a liar will not escape" (19:5).
"6 Many seek the favor of the generous,
And everyone is a friend to a giver of gifts" (19:6).
"To get wisdom is to love oneself;
To keep understanding is to prosper" (19:8).
"A stupid child is ruin to a father,
And a wife's quarreling is a continual dripping of rain" (19:13).
"The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination;

How much more when brought with evil intent" (21:27).
"Do not speak in the hearing of a fool,
Who will only despise the wisdom of your words" (23:9).
"Do not withhold discipline from your children;
If you beat them with a rod, they will not die" (23:13).
"Do not be among winebibbers,
Or among gluttonous eaters of meat;
For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty,
And drowsiness will clothe them with rags" (23:20-21).
"Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house,
Otherwise the neighbor will become
Weary of you and hate you" (25:17).
"A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey,
And a rod for the back of fools" (26:3).
"Like a thorn bush brandished by the hand of a drunkard
Is a proverb in the mouth of a fool" (26:9).
"Like somebody who takes a passing dog by the ears
Is one who meddles in the quarrel of another" (26:17).
"The clever see danger and hide;
But the simple go on, and suffer for it" (27:12).
"The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold,
So a person is tested by being praised" (27:21).
"A ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor;
But one who hates unjust gain will enjoy a long life" (28:16).
"To show partiality is not good
Yet for a piece of bread a person may do wrong" (28:21).
"Whoever rebukes a person will afterward find more favor
Than one who flatters with the tongue" (28:23).
"The rod and reproof give wisdom,
But a mother is disgraced by a neglected child" (29:15).

As it is evident from the above given randomly chosen texts, the circumstances and themes commented in Proverbs are diverse. Proverbs try to give instructions on all possibly imaginable situations in life: the relationship between parents and children (6:20-23; 13:1; 17:1-6), the difference between a wise and a fool (26:1ff.; 28:1ff.), the importance of good friends (29:27), the importance of a wise wife

(30:10-31), ones duties towards his neighbor (3:25-35), importance of the virtues like generosity, faithfulness, and justice (11:1-8), the necessity of controlling ones passions and sexual desires (5:3-10; 6:32-33), the need of moderation while speaking, need of keeping silence while hearing, why should one be wise and hard working, how should one behave before the king and persons in authority, why should one have fear of God, how should one treat the animals, etc. As the above quoted examples indicate, these sayings are not arranged according to any logic.

These proverbs might be classified into eight groups:⁴³ a) statements of facts like "It is bad, it is bad," says the buyer; but when he goes away, then he boasts" (20:14); b) statements in which the consequences are pointed out like "My son, fear the Lord and the king, and do not disobey either of them; for disaster from them will rise suddenly, and who knows the ruin that will come from them both?" (24:21-22); c) condemnations like "the evil man has no future; the lamp of the wicked will be put out" (24:20); d) antithetical comparisons like "A wicked man earns deceptive wages, but one who sows righteousness gets a sure reward" (11:18); e) commands like "Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge" (14:7); f) antithetical commands like "Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you" (9:8); g) similes like "As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed" (26:14); and h) numerical sayings like "Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand" (30:18).

As mentioned above, since the life of man is too short, it is not enough for him to learn from his own experience to attain success in life; he should also learn from the experiences of others and from the experiences of the previous generations that lived before him. One of the basic ideas of the sages was that "whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools suffers harm" (13:20). Proverbs enable man to acquire the knowledge of the people of the past generations. That was the reason why the sages collected and transmitted the wisdom of the older generations to the younger ones; proverbs are presented as if they are knowledge communicated by a father/master to his son/disciple:

"Hear, my child, your father's instruction,
And do not reject your mother's teaching;
For they are a fair garland for your head,

And pendants for your neck.
My child, if sinners entice you, do not consent" (1:8-10).
"My son, if you receive my words
And treasure up my commandments with you..." (2:1).
"My son, do not forget my teaching,
But let your heart keep my commandments" (3:1).
"Listen, children, to a father's instruction,
And be attentive, that you may gain insight" (4:1).
"Hear, my son, and accept my words,
That the years of your life may be many" (4:10).
"My son, be attentive to my wisdom,
Incline your ear to my understanding" (5:1).
"My son, if you have become surety for your neighbor,
Have given your pledge for a stranger" (6:1).
"My son, keep your father's commandment,
And forsake not your mother's teaching" (6:20).
"My son, keep my words
And treasure up my commandments with you" (7:1).
"A wise son hears his father's instruction,
But a scoffer does not listen to rebuke" (13:1).

The sayings in the Book of Proverbs are not organized either thematically or according to any specific style. Still the present book can be divided into seven parts or groups of sayings on the basis of their introductory verses:⁴⁴ 1) Proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel (Prov 1-9); 2) Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16); 3) Sayings of the wise (22:17-24:22); 4) Proverbs of the wise (24:23-34); 5) Proverbs of Solomon that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied (25-29); 6) Sayings of Agur son of Jakeh (30:1-33); 7) Teachings of King Lemuel (31:1-31). The introductory section (Prov 1-9) and the concluding section (Prov 30-31) together give an interpretive frame to the whole collection. Fear of the Lord is seen here as the beginning of wisdom (1:7; 9:10; 31:30). A wise man requires reverence for God and knowledge of how the world and humans work. Wise folk know the way things "ought to be," and they have a sense of right and wrong.⁴⁵

How can one make his life successful? What are the wise solutions for daily problems? How should one behave in the day-to-day

life-situations? Answers to these and similar questions were the concern of the people of the old which became the content of the saying in the Book of Proverbs. The book is in fact a literary anthology of the traditional wisdom gathered from diverse spheres of life and handed down by the sages.⁴⁶

Wisdom sayings intended to promote exemplary behavior among the students by teaching them self-control and giving them orientation. Normally they were guidelines for the people in the higher layer of the social strata. Students were exhorted to be humble and well disciplined. The sayings promoted silence as a commendable behavior. Several famous Egyptian pharaohs gave similar teachings (e.g., Instruction of Meri-ka-re). It is already noted by scholars that the Instructions of (pharaoh) Amenemophet (12th century B.C.) are similar to proverbs 22:17-23:11 which means that these sayings are Israelite adaptations of Egyptian wisdom.⁴⁷ Like the Egyptians, the sages in Mesopotamia also imparted wisdom teachings (similar to the biblical proverbs). The collection called Instructions of Shuruppak⁴⁸ contains instructions given to the Flood Hero Ziusudra by his father and king... One another Mesopotamian collection of the proverbs is known as the Akkadian Counsels of Wisdom.⁴⁹

Because the teachings in the sayings in Proverbs have a value that transcends time, it is difficult to date the time of origin of several sayings although the book has traditionally been ascribed to King Solomon (cf. Prov 1:1; 10:1; 25:1). Still it is clear that in the present form it is not a book written by Solomon (cf. Prov 25:1; 30:1; 31:1). Just as Israel ascribed to David the Psalter, they ascribed to Solomon the other wisdom books (Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Book of Wisdom) because he was thought to be the wisest king that Israel had ever seen. The proof for his wisdom is elucidated in 1King 3-4, 10.

According to the Book of Kings Solomon wrote 3000 proverbs and 1005 poems: "29 God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore,³⁰ so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt.³¹ He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations.³² He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five.³³ He would speak of trees,

from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish.³⁴ People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom" (1King 4:29-34). The wise decision of Solomon when two women claimed the same child was well known (1King 3:16-28). The main issue for the ancients was not the authorship in the modern sense but authority of the works that gained by ascribing them to great and known figures in history.

Modern scholarship unveils that the Book of Proverbs was compiled over several centuries and contain materials from these centuries; the book also show the stamp of several editors (cf. Prov 1:1; 10:1; 22:17; 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1). Generally scholars consider Prov 10:1-22:16; 25:1-29:27 to be the "Solomonic Collections" or the earlier collections that comes from the monarchic period; since in Prov 1-9 'fear of the Lord' is taken as a central motif and wisdom is personified as a woman as in Sirach, these chapters are considered to be post-exilic.⁵⁰ The motif of loose women (strange women) found in these chapters points to the Persian period in which foreign women were expelled from community (Ezra 9:1-4; 10:6-43).⁵¹ In fact, the Book of Proverbs itself shows signs that it is not the work of a single hand. For example, tradition labels Prov 25-29 as proverbs of Solomon copied by the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah (25:1); similarly, Prov 30:1-33 appears as the sayings of Agur son of Jakeh, and Prov 31:1-31 as teaching of King Lemuel's Mother.

The comparative texts with Proverbs from Egypt and Meso-potamia presented in the beginning of this book show that proverbs of the Bible come from a wider cultural setting and they should be read as part of that wider general tradition of humankind.

Principle of Retribution

God, the creator of the world, is righteous; therefore, he tries to maintain righteousness in the world. Man is the image of God which also means that he has the freedom of choice similar to that of God. The sages were concerned about the consequence of human choices. It is also to be noted that at that time the Israelites did not begin to believe in the life after death. Since they did not believe in after life, the consequences of ones actions had to be met in this world itself. God being just, they thought, rewarded the good works of men while punished the evil doers (cf. Ps 39:10-11; 40:12; 41:3-4; 51:8). As a

result the sages thought of the principle retribution as something that remains at the foundation of the created world order;⁵² it appears to be the main theme of several sayings in Proverbs (e.g., Prov 3:19-20; 8:22-31); most of the sayings in the book are based directly or indirectly on this principle. When a proverb states the consequence of any action, this consequence emerges as a natural outcome, which implies that there is a moral order, and there exists a power that preserves that order. For example, see the following sayings that come from the older collections:

"The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry,
But he thwarts the craving of the wicked" (10:3).
"Whoever walks in integrity walks securely,
But whoever follows perverse ways will be found out" (10:9).
"The wage of the righteous leads to life,
The gain of the wicked to sin" (10:16).
"When the tempest passes, the wicked are no more,
But the righteous are established forever" (10:25).
"The hope of the righteous ends in gladness,
But the expectation of the wicked comes to nothing" (10:28).
"The hope of the righteous ends in gladness,
But the expectation of the wicked comes to nothing.
The way of the Lord is a stronghold for the upright,
But destruction for evildoers" (10:28-29).
"No one finds security by wickedness,
But the root of the righteous will never be moved" (12:3).
"The wicked are overthrown and are no more,
But the house of the righteous will stand" (12:7).
"No harm happens to the righteous,
But the wicked are filled with trouble" (12:21).
"The light of the righteous rejoices,
But the lamp of the wicked goes out" (13:9).
"The wicked are overthrown by their evildoing,
But the righteous find a refuge in their integrity" (14:32).
"One who justifies the wicked
And one who condemns the righteous
Are both alike an abomination to the Lord" (17:15).

"If you say, "Look, we did not know this"
Does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?
Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it?
And will he not repay all according to their deeds?" (24:12).

This theological current although dominantly visible in the earlier collections of proverbs, as quoted above, it also appears in the later collections as seen in the following examples:

"Therefore walk in the way of the good,
And keep to the paths of the just.
For the upright will abide in the land,
And the innocent will remain in it;
But the wicked will be cut off from the land,
And the treacherous will be rooted out of it" (2:20-22).
"The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked,
But he blesses the abode of the righteous" (3:33).
"But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
Which shines brighter and brighter until full day.
The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
They do not know what they stumble over" (4:18-19).

As already discussed, the sages had the experience that in the universe everything happened in an orderly fashion and everything in the world appeared to be recurring. Order and repetition were thus realities of experience. What God does in the material universe should also probably be done in the spiritual world. The righteous God rewards the just and punishes the evil. He should be doing this not at random but repeatedly. That means that the actions of God have got a set pattern. This notion was the cause for the formation of the principle of retribution. The principle then became the basis of many sayings in Proverbs:

"The way of the Lord is a stronghold for the upright,
But destruction for evildoers" (10:29).
"Crooked minds are an abomination to the Lord,
But those of blameless ways are his delight.
Be assured, the wicked will not go unpunished,
But those who are righteous will escape" (11:20-21).
"Keep straight the path of your feet,

And all your ways will be sure.
Do not swerve to the right or to the left;
Turn your foot away from evil (4:26-27).

If man succeeds in appropriating the message of Proverbs and succeeds in finding out the divinely implanted order in the universe and in adjusting his life to this order, his life will be a great success, because God who creates the world by ordering it preserves it mainly by maintaining the order.

Wisdom as the Way to Happiness

The principle of retribution is closely connected both with the notion of happiness in life and sufferings. According to the conception of Proverbs with regard to moral life there are two ways open before man: the way of righteousness and wisdom, against the way of wickedness and suffering. These two ways are personified through the woman-wisdom and woman-foolly (cf. 9:1-6, 13-18). Accordingly, there are two ways of living: one blessed and the other cursed. Instructions in Proverbs and Psalms are often concerned with the right choice that one has to make.

- ¹⁰ Hear, my child, and accept my words,
That the years of your life may be many.
¹¹ I have taught you the way of wisdom;
I have led you in the paths of uprightness.
¹² When you walk, your step will not be hampered;
And if you run, you will not stumble.
¹³ Keep hold of instruction; do not let go;
Guard her, for she is your life.
¹⁴ Do not enter the path of the wicked,
And do not walk in the way of evildoers.
¹⁵ Avoid it; do not go on it;
Turn away from it and pass on.
¹⁶ For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong;
They are robbed of sleep unless
They have made someone stumble.
¹⁷ For they eat the bread of wickedness
And drink the wine of violence.
¹⁸ But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,

Which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

- ¹⁹ The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
They do not know what they stumble over"
(Prov 4:10-19).

Wisdom psalms also make similar appeal to people who live in a situation of choice. See for example the first psalm:

- ¹ Happy are those who do not follow
The advice of the wicked,
Or take the path that sinners tread,
Or sit in the seat of scoffers;
² But their delight is in the law of the Lord,
And on his law they meditate day and night.
³ They are like trees planted by streams of water,
Which yield their fruit in its season,
And their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.
⁴ The wicked are not so,
But are like chaff that the wind drives away.
⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
⁶ For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish" (Ps 1).

The sages advised their disciples to choose the right path (Prov 1:15). It was wisdom that helped man to choose this path and helped him to adapt himself to the divinely implanted order. The sages therefore encouraged people to submit themselves to a continuous search for wisdom (Prov 2:1-2; 3:13, 21; 4:5; 17:24; 19:20). The conception was that those who acquired wisdom would also make their life happy:

- "Happy are those who find wisdom,
And those who get understanding" (3:13).
"She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
Those who hold her fast are called happy" (3:18).
"And now, my children, listen to me:
Happy are those who keep my ways" (8:32).
"Happy is the one who listens to me,
Watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors" (8:34).

"Those who despise their neighbors are sinners,
But happy are those who are kind to the poor" (14:21).
"Those who are attentive to a matter will prosper,
And happy are those who trust in the Lord" (16:20).

According to the sages, thus human happiness was the result of choices that people made in their lives. Lack of wisdom meant a life of wickedness and consequent suffering. The sages therefore instructed their students to be seekers of happiness by being disciples of wisdom.

According to Proverbs only those who have fear of God can acquire wisdom in the world created by God together with his wisdom. Fear of God is therefore the beginning (1:7; 9:10) and source (14:27) of wisdom. The sage considered life in the God-created world as a divine gift. He therefore had only one prayer to God that God would not give him things for which he is unworthy and should not withhold from him what is necessary for his life:

- ⁷ Two things I ask of you;
Do not deny them to me before I die:
⁸ Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
Give me neither poverty nor riches;
Feed me with the food that I need,
⁹ Or I shall be full, and deny you,
And say, "Who is the Lord?"
Or I shall be poor, and steal,
And profane the name of my God" (30:7-9).

Women in Proverbs

As it is almost evident from the introductory and concluding parts, teachings in Proverbs intend to teach only young men knowledge, and often the women is seen only in relation to man. Although it is true that folly is personified as a woman and a prostitute, this may not be taken as anti-feminism because wisdom is also personified as a woman. Beyond this, however, teachings in Proverbs are generally presented as if they are teachings of a father imparted to his son (never to a daughter).⁵³ Some think that this points only to the ancient patriarchal world view in which women had no voice.⁵⁴ Whatever is the reason, women would not get much attention in the book. In addition Proverbs 31:10 declares that it is very difficult to find a good wife. In

Proverbs 12 a good woman is declared as a crown of her husband (12:4). That means that the teachings in Proverbs do not give enough concern to women as the teachings are mainly imparted to young men.

In Proverbs 2:12-22 the sage instructs the young to keep himself away from loose woman; otherwise it would result in the alienation from the Promised Land. According to Prov 5:1-14, the contact with her would bring a double punishment: loss of wealth to the foreigners, and disgrace in the community. She would hunt the life of one who goes after her (Prov 6:24-28); the fool believes in her words and endangers his life (7:6-23). Even when gave detailed instruction to young men about loose women, the sages in Proverbs were in fact silent about loose men. This would later generate a reaction which is visible in the Song of Songs. We will come to this argument later in the Songs.

As a final comment one can say that for the wise ancestors, Proverbs was not a boring book as it often appears to us today. As they wished to acquire wisdom and knowledge, Proverbs opened before them the door to great wisdom and success. One who had learned and personalized the instructions taught by Proverbs was a man well trained to face any circumstance in life wisely and with confidence. The wise sayings of the sages remained fresh in the memory of these people and it came to their memory as the occasions demanded. They persuaded and guided them to act according to a set pattern which made them fit for mature behavior. Accordingly, their way of doing became acceptable to all. Proverbs thus helped people to gain respect.

End notes

- ³⁷ Cf. J. Rogerson and P. Davies, *The Old Testament World*, London-New York, T&T Clark, 2005, 187.
³⁸ Cf. J.L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel*, New York et al., ABRL, Doubleday, 1998, 86.
³⁹ Cf. W. Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2003, 306.
⁴⁰ Cf. S. Niditch, *Oral and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1996.

- ⁴¹ Cf. J. Williams, "The Power of Form: A Study of Biblical Proverbs," in *Gnomic Wisdom*, ed. J. D. Crossan, Chico, Semeia 17, 1980, 38-40; R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom in the Old Testament," 921-924
- ⁴² Cf. R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom in the Old Testament," *ABD* VI, 921-924
- ⁴³ Cf. J. Rogerson and P. Davies, *The Old Testament World*, 188-189.
- ⁴⁴ Cf. J.L. Crenshaw, "Book of Proverbs," *ABD* V, 513.
- ⁴⁵ Cf. C. Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995, 113-28.
- ⁴⁶ Documents from Egypt prove that since 2300 B.C., till the time of Ptolemy (4th century B.C.) higher officials and sages in Egypt transmitted to their disciples short sayings like proverbs; they were known as *sebayit* ('instruction/'teaching'). The earliest of these is the fragmentary Instruction of Prince Hardedef; M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 58-80; cf. J. D. Ray, "Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 18-29.
- ⁴⁷ Cf. R.E. Murphy, "Israel's Wisdom: Dialogue Between the Sages," in J.H. Charlesworth and M.A. Daise, ed., *Light in a Spotless Mirror*, Harrisburg et. al., Continuum, 2003, 11; W.H. Schmidt, *Old Testament Introduction*, 371-372; H.C. Washington, *Wealth and Poverty in the Instruction of Amenemope and the Hebrew Proverbs*, Atlanta, SBLDS 142, Scholars Press, 1994.
- ⁴⁸ Cf. *ANET*, 594-595.
- ⁴⁹ Cf. *ANET*, 595-596.
- ⁵⁰ Cf. J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom," 67; R.E. Murphy, "Israel's Wisdom," 8, 18.
- ⁵¹ Cf. W. Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 316.
- ⁵² Cf. R.E. Murphy, "Israel's Wisdom," 13
- ⁵³ A similar style is visible in the Aramaic Wisdom of Ahiqar (lines 82, 96, 127, 129, 149) and in Babylonian Wisdom tradition (see Instructions of Shuruppak, line 9; Counsels of Wisdom, line 81; Akkadian Counsel of *Sube'awilum* [or *Shupe'awilum*] attested in Ugarit I,9; II 6; I,17, 19); Cf. the discussion in J. Day, "Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom," 65-66.
- ⁵⁴ Cf. J.L. Crenshaw, "Book of Proverbs," *ABD* V, 513-520.

Chapter 4

Job - Ecclesiastes - Song of Songs

We have already seen that although tradition attributes to Solomon the authorship of the Book of Proverbs, this book contains not only older sayings that come even from 3rd millennium B.C., but also sayings and wisdom of the post exilic period (cf. 1King 4:29-34; Prov 25:1). Proverbs 10-29 should have been already composed or told by sages at least in the monarchic times. Major number of these proverbs and some psalms were composed based on the tenet of retribution. Since God who created the world is a just God, man has to be just. In order to help people to be righteous, sages had formulated several sayings and earnestly taught them to the younger generations. If one succeeds in memorizing these proverbs, they thought, and personalizing them in order to set them as guidelines for his behavior, his life would be successful. The reason for this they found in the theory of retribution: the just God who created the order rewarded the good works that were helpful to maintain the established order and punished the evildoers. The doctrine of retribution thus became one of the important moral notions held by the Israelite society.

It is the experience of humankind that any doctrine, when it is taught for a long period of time, would eventually attain a dogmatic character. The same fate seemed to have happened to the principle of retribution as well: it exclaimed that God would always reward the good works and will always punish the evil. Often teachers employ exaggeration as a mode of convincing students. When the principle of retribution was thus dogmatized, it slowly brought people to the idea that even the works of God could be controlled by human behavior. One has to remember that at that time the notion of God of the Israelites was not theologically as high as that of ours and that they did not believe in life after death. This implied that the reward for every action should be given in this life itself. According to the principle of retribution, if one does a good action he will surely be rewarded, and similarly if one does evil he will surely be punished by God in this life itself. This principle, which is basically true, is accepted by all the biblical books.

Notably, if this theory is dogmatized, it would lead to a kind of "determinism" and God will lose his freedom and the power to control events in the world. That means that if one does something good, God being 'righteous' is obliged to reward him; he is eligible to be rewarded. God will 'lose' his freedom and he would be conditioned to act according to the human performance, and forced to act according to a set pattern. If one reads and interprets some of the proverbs in this way the gravity of the matter would come to light:

"The Lord *does not let the righteous go hungry,*
But he thwarts the craving of the wicked" (10:3)
"The blessing of the Lord makes rich,
And he adds *no sorrow with it*" (10:22).
"The fear of the Lord prolongs life,
But the years of the wicked *will be short*" (10:27).
"Be assured, the wicked *will not go unpunished,*
But those who are righteous will escape" (11:21).
"No one finds security by wickedness,
But the root of the *righteous will never be moved*" (12:3).
"*No harm* happens to the righteous,
But the wicked are filled with trouble" (12:21).
"The light of the righteous rejoices,
But the lamp of the wicked goes out" (13:9).

"*Misfortune pursues sinners,*
But prosperity rewards the righteous" (13:21).
"A perverse man will be filled with the fruit of his ways,
And a good man with the fruit of his deeds" (14:14).
"Do not fret because of evildoers.
Do not envy the wicked;
For the *evil have no future;*
The lamp of the wicked will go out" (24:19-20)
(See also 2:8; 3:33; 4:11-12, 26 etc.).

These and similar proverbs were taught from generation to generation and in the course of history through them the principle of retribution seems to have gained a dogmatic character.

Together with this there was also another similar conceptual development. As we have seen, the sages used to teach that wisdom was necessary for success in life and man should constantly search for wisdom. Wisdom being a good companion and divine guide is able to bring man to success. If one succeeds in acquiring wisdom, he will also succeed in mastering his life. The sages therefore taught people to pray constantly for wisdom and strive persistently to acquire wisdom. The prayer of such a sage is seen in psalm 119 and in several wisdom instructions. If one loves, longs for, prays for, and tries constantly to attain wisdom, he would find and get her. This would give him success:

³² And now, my children, listen to me (says wisdom):
Happy are those who keep my ways.
³³ Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it.
³⁴ Happy is the one who listens to me,
Watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.
³⁵ For whoever finds me finds life
And obtains favor from the Lord;
³⁶ But those who miss me injure themselves;
All who hate me love death" (Prov 8:32-36).

A wise man, sages thought, can face life more intelligibly and attain success.

As already said above, these two principles, if dogmatized, God would be conditioned to act in accordance with human presuppositions. God will have to hold on to the principle of retribution and give

success only to those who are in search of wisdom. Although sounded correct and proved true from several experiences, human experience also showed that God was still free in his actions and he was not under the control of certain set of laws. Several sages found good people suffering, and wise people meeting failure in life. This experience gave them new insights that questioned the dogmatic character of the traditional thinking. The wisdom of such realistic sages is uncovered in Job and Ecclesiastes. Proverbs are presented as exhortations given by the elder generation to the younger ones, whereas Job and Ecclesiastes are conceived as discussions conducted between elders who hold conflicting theological notions.

Job

The story of Job, which is said to have happened in Uz in North-Eastern Arabia (Job 1:1), was written based on foreign traditions in the late exilic period or in the early post-exilic period.⁵⁵ This dating agrees not only with the mention of Job as one of the righteous Israelite ancestors by Ezekiel (Ezek 14:14, 20) but also with the mention of Satan (Job 1-3), who appears only in the post exilic literature (1Chr 21:1; Zech 3:1-2). That means that the Book of Job was written after the formation of at least the first collections of proverbs which people already knew.

Throughout the history of Israel there were righteous people who observed all the laws commanded by God through Moses. The prophets in Israel were some of them. Their life of righteousness should be valued in the context of syncretism and idolatry practiced by a good portion of the people and kings. In 587 B.C. Babylon conquered Judah, destroyed its cities including the holy city, and exiled its people to Babylon. Among these exiles there were also righteous people which signified that to be righteous before God/Yahweh was of no special advantage. In fact prophets like Second Isaiah and Ezekiel lived in Babylon. To understand the thoughts of this period one should be aware of what exile really meant.

Exile was not a simple life in a foreign land with ones own family, although later they might find one. It was in fact separation from all what was ones own. The great emperors wanted to eliminate all kinds of rebellion from their land. They therefore separated each individual from his family members, and from his social groups. The separated people would then be brought to different parts of the empire. After

that they were not allowed have any contact with the other members of their family, if they existed at all in any other part of the empire. As a result, one who had lost all what was his own and lived in a foreign land under slavery was subject to both physical and mental pain. In the mind of several of them came up serious questions that challenged their traditional faith: "What is the use in serving Yahweh their God who appears to have failed before Babylon?" "What is the use in being righteous before him?" This religious crisis became the reason for the loss of faith of many Judeans in Babylon. The thoughts of people who suffered great pain are put in the mouth of the wife of Job: "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die" (2:9).

This historical experience challenged the traditional dogma-tized notion of retribution. Faithful and wise sages of this period seem to have realized that the principle of retribution was not an exclusive one; it has its limitations. In the coming pages we will see that the experiences and thoughts of these wise people are personified in the person of Job. The three friends of Job, by contrast, personify the traditional and exaggerated notion of retribution. The book can generally be defined as a disputation between Job, his friends, Elihu, and God.⁵⁶ This is clear from the arguments of the friends of Job who wanted to convince Job of a certain theological conception (cf. Job 4:7-11; 8:8-22; 11:13-20; 15:17-35; 18:5-21; 20:4-29; 22:5-20; cf. also 34:10-30). These notions will be clarified if one goes through the discussions in the Book of Job.

Structure of the Book

The Book might be divided into three parts:

- 1) The Righteous Job loses his sons, daughters, and wealth; hearing the news of these disasters, his three friends come to Job (1:1-2:13).
- 2) The discussions between Job and his three friends (3:1-31:40).
 - a. Complaint of Job (3:1-26).
Speech of Eliphaz (4:1-5:27).
 - b. Reply/Speech of Job (6:1-7:21)
Speech of Bildad (8:1-22)
 - c. Reply/Speech of Job (9:1-10:22)
Speech of Zophar (11:1-30)

- d. Reply/Speech of Job (12:1-14:22)
Second speech of Eliphaz (15:1-35)
 - e. Reply/Speech of Job (16:1-17:16)
Second speech of Bildad (18:1-21)
 - f. Reply/Speech of Job (19:1-29)
Second speech of Zophar (20:1-29)
 - g. Reply/Speech of Job (21:1-34)
Third speech of Eliphaz (22:1-30)
 - h. Reply/Speech of Job (23:1-24:25)
Third speech of Bildad (25:1-6)
 - i. Reply/Speech of Job (26:1-31:40)
 - J. Speech of Elihu (32:1-37:24)
 - k. God speaks (38:1-40:2)
Job speaks (40:3-5)
 - l. God speaks (40:6-41:34)
Job speaks (42:1-6)
 - m. God speaks (42:7-8).
- 3) Conclusion (42:9-17)

Theology of the Book

Job lived in Uz in northern Arabia. He was a righteous man (Job 1:1; cf. also Jer 25:20; Lam 4:21). He was very earnest in keeping all the laws and statutes of God (Job 1:5; 29:11-15). His society used to respect him (29:7-11, 21-25) because he kept himself away from all sins and unjust behavior. No evil thought found place in his mind (31:9-10); he used to protect the poor, widows and orphan (29:13, 16). At the same time he was very rich having 7000 lambs, 3000 camels, 500 pair of oxen, 500 donkeys, and a great number of servants. He had seven sons and three daughters. As the above said numbers highlight, everything that Job had was perfect.

"His (Job's) sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their

hearts." This is what Job always did" (1:4-6). Job in fact wanted not only that he himself be righteous, he wished that his family also be so.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and the satan also came with them. Here the satan is not a proper name but a common name preceded by the definite article (*hassatan*). He should be one among the heavenly beings who has taken the part of the accuser for the time being.⁵⁷ He is the accuser. "The Lord said to the satan, "Where have you come from?" the satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." The Lord said to the satan, "Have you considered my Servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (1:6-8). God was in fact proud of the righteousness of his servant Job so he was also giving him protection.

The satan now said to God: "...Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face" (1:9-11). According to the satan, Job fears God only because God protects his possessions with a strong fence. He is conscious of the retributive justice of God; such a piety is only egoism. If God would stretch out his hand and touch his possessions, thinks the accuser, Job would curse God and would reject him. The question raised by the sage through the image of the satan is this: why do people fear God? The answer is 'people fear God because they want to get protection.' Such a fear is not sincere piety.

God however was sure of Job's faithfulness that would go beyond a mechanic practice of any law; therefore, he gave satan authority over all Job's possessions (1:12). The story continues with the following narration: "One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three

columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you." While he was still speaking, another came and said, "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you" (1:13-19). The satan thus destroyed all the possessions of Job one after the other. Only the reader, and not Job, now knows that the evil happened to Job was not the result of any of his evil actions.

Job who has already lost everything now arose from his seat, tore his clothes, and shaved his head as a sign of mourning. Instead of cursing God, however, he fell to the ground and worshipped God making a great confession of faith: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). Even in his disgraceful situation, Job recognized God as the giver of everything and thus proved himself to be a righteous person.

After a while the heavenly council was again summoned. There the satan gave a report to God of everything happening on earth. God still being more proud of his Servant Job's righteousness made the following declaration before the satan: "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason" (2:3). The satan then, changing his previous argument, made the following assertion: "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face" (2:4-5). Even then God had no doubt about the integrity of Job; therefore he gave the satan authority over his body and health. Satan thus got all authority over Job except that he was not allowed to take the life of Job.

Satan then inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job arose from his seat, sat in the ashes, and began to scrape himself with a potsherd. Now his wife approached Job rebuking him the following: "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die" (2:9). Job still did not fail to sustain

his integrity. If one receives good things from God, thought Job, he should also be ready to receive evil from him. This conviction helped Job to remain faithful to God even amidst his severe loss and suffering.

Job had three friends; when they heard about the misfortune happened to Job, they came to comfort him: Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. When they saw him, they were unable even to recognize him due to the wounds. When they saw him in such a disgraceful situation, they could not utter anything; they tore their robe and sat beside him seven days and seven nights not speaking even a word. At the end, Job himself broke the dire silence and began to speak. In severe pain then he cursed his life and time of his birth. While agonizingly declaring that a chain of suffering has come upon him, Job asked a number of questions with regard to his suffering: "Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in...?" (3:23; cf. 3:11-29). Now the friends had to say something in response. The sage thus prepared the setting for a theologically deep discussion on the question on the suffering of the innocent person.

When the friends of Job heard the theological questions of the agitated Job, they being sages could not keep silence because, according to their conscience and theory that they held, good people would always be rewarded whereas evil ones will always be punished. Eliphaz therefore responded Job with the following words: "Your words have supported those who were stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees. But now it has come to you, and you are impatient; it touches you, and you are dismayed. Is not your fear of God your confidence and the integrity of your ways your hope?" (4:4-6). After having thus accused Job for his lament, he stated the principle which according to him would explain the reason for his suffering: "Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed" (4:7-9).

For the suffering Job, this explanation should be hard; so in order to console Job Eliphaz stated another generally accepted wisdom principle which says that no man can ever be innocent before God: "Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their maker?" (4:17). Continuing his discourse Eliphaz advised Job that he should seek God (5:8). If he is not ready to humble himself

before God in order to seek him, God would trap him in his own craftiness (5:13). To be reproved by God is a fortune and he is able to heal any wound (5:16-18). With the intention of substantiating his statement, Eliphaz added that what he said was true and had been the experience of the preceding generations: "See, we have searched this out; it is true. Hear, and know it for yourself" (5:27). This was the reason why many of the wisdom sayings/proverbs and especially the theory of retribution were recognized as valid, i.e., conclusions drawn from experience and observation of a long period of time.

The merciless words of his Friend Eliphaz hurt Job. Job knew that this explanation for suffering was usually given by sages; however, from his own experience Job was no more convinced of its truthfulness. While narrating his afflictions, therefore, Job declares that he has not discarded the words of God: "This would be my consolation; I would even exult in unrelenting pain; for I have not denied the words of the Holy One" (6:10). After this confession of innocence, Job blames his friends of lack of mercy and says that those who withhold kindness from a friend forsake the fear of the almighty (6:14). Notably, according to the sages, fear of God was the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10). Job thus points to their foolishness instead of their wisdom.

The friends of Job were considering themselves as wise and they thought that they knew explanations of everything that happened on earth and accordingly the reason for the suffering of Job as well. To them Job, who knew that he was just, said the following words: "Teach me, and I will be silent; make me understand how I have gone wrong. How forceful are honest words! But your reproof, what does it reprove?" (6:24-25). Then Job pleaded for their mercy (6:28-30). Job subsequently lamented over the mortal and perishable character of human life (7:1-10). Man is an insignificant being on earth. Who is he that the almighty God always keeps a watch over him in order to punish him precisely according to his deeds? (7:17-19). Job has a question to God which people used to ask amidst their sufferings, i.e., even if this mortal human being sins, why does God not forgive him? "Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be" (7:21). Through his apparently critical speech, Job on the one hand tried to declare his innocence and on the other hand said that the mind of God is unsearchable for man.

When Job thus criticized the works of God and justified his own deeds, his Second Friend Bildad could not keep silence. Holding fast to the traditional wisdom thinking, he asked the following question to Job: "Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right?" (8:3). Referring to the death of the sons of Job, he said that they have sinned against God (8:4). Bildad continues to tell him to learn wisdom from the older generations instead of analyzing life based only on one's own experience: "For inquire now of bygone generations, and consider what their ancestors have found; for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing, for our days on earth are but a shadow" (8:8-9). These generations, according to Bildad, would say the following from their experience: "See, God will not reject a blameless person, nor take the hand of evildoers" (8:20). He thus categorically stated that God was acting according to the principle of retribution. In order to console Job he then added the following words: "He (God) will yet fill your mouth with laughter, and your lips with shouts of joy. Those who hate you will be clothed with shame, and the tent of the wicked will be no more" (8:21-22).

Now Job comes with his response to Bildad. He accepts that God rewards the just and punishes the evil doers: "Indeed I know that this is so" (9:2a). Job however has more to say from his own experience: "But how can a mortal be just before God? If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand" (9:2-3). This is in fact a critique on the attitude of Eliphaz and Bildad that they know the reason for Job's suffering, i.e., they think that they know the mind of God. After narrating the glorious things done by God, Job says that his mind is unsearchable for man and all questions raised by humans are not answered by God. He is not so small to answer all the questions of man. Actually no one can question God: "Who will say to him, 'What are you doing?'" (9:12). God's mind and actions, thinks Job, cannot be delimited by wisdom conceptions and human definitions. He transcends human conceptions. Man being mortal can never be righteous before the immortal God; he should in fact beg for God's mercy: "Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him; I must appeal for mercy to my accuser" (9:15). Even the tongue of the innocent will cheat him. Since man cannot be righteous before God he cannot expect that God will reward him according to his righteousness. That means that one cannot depend totally on the principle of retribution for explaining human suffering: "When disaster brings sudden death, he

(God) mocks at the calamity of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges -- if it is not he, who then is it?" (9:23-24). If one accepts God as the creator and as one, then there are experiences that cannot be interpreted with human notions.

Man cannot be righteous before God with his own works (9:29). By showing ones own righteous actions, thinks Job, he cannot argue with God: "For he is not a mortal, as I am, that I might answer him that we should come to trial together. There is no umpire between us, who might lay his hand on us both. If he would take his rod away from me, and not let dread of him terrify me, then I would speak without fear of him, for I know I am not what I am thought to be" (9:32-35). God transcends human understanding: "If I sin, you watch me, and do not acquit me of my iniquity. If I am wicked, woe to me! If I am righteous, I cannot lift up my head, for I am filled with disgrace and look upon my affliction. Bold as a lion you hunt me; you repeat your exploits against me. You renew your witnesses against me, and increase your vexation toward me; you bring fresh troops against me" (10:14-17).

Being conscious of the nothingness of man before God, Job, representing all the suffering people, asks the following question: "Why did you bring me forth from the womb? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me, and were as though I had not been, carried from the womb to the grave" (10:18-19). The question and the following words are a cry of Job that emerges from his wisdom and experience of suffering. Job now prays to God to leave him alone so that he can find a little comfort before his death: "Are not the days of my life few? Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort before I go, never to return, to the land of gloom and deep darkness, the land of gloom and chaos, where light is like darkness" (10:20-22).

In the ears of the third friend of Job Zophar, who was also a similar representative of the traditional wisdom, these words of Job echoed as if a self justification (cf. 11:2-4). Holding on to the traditional wisdom thinking he says the following words: "Oh, that God would speak, and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For wisdom is many-sided" (11:5-6a). Zophar thinking that he knows the mind of God now passes the "divine judgment" on Job: "Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves" (11:6b). Zophar agrees with Job to say that the mysteries of divine

thinking are beyond the comprehension of man (11:7-10). At the same time if man does evil God would not leave him unpunished (11:11). Suffering surely is the result of divine wrath. If Job still thinks that he is wise and innocent, Zophar can only be pity of his knowledge. He can only sarcastically repeat the following proverb: "A stupid person will get understanding, when a wild ass is born human" (11:12). Zophar then invites Job to repent and thus find mercy before God (11:13-19). The invitation ends with a warning: "The eyes of the wicked will fail; all way of escape will be lost to them, and their hope is to breathe their last" (11:20).

Answering Zophar, Job now declares that all that he has said up to now are also known to him as well: "Look, my eye has seen all this; my ear has heard and understood it. What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you" (13:1-2; cf. also 12:1-3). Job knows all these things but now knows also that his suffering has a different reason which the traditional wisdom is unable to find out. Instead of trying to understand Job, his friends are ridiculing him with their presumptuous interpretations (12:4). Job really wants to know why he, being innocent, should suffer these things. In fact God has now stripped the wise of the earth off their understanding: "He strips understanding from the leaders of the earth, and makes them wander in a pathless waste. They grope in the dark without light; he makes them stagger like a drunkard" (12:24-25). This is actually an apt response to Zophar's ridiculing.

Since the wise of the earth are devoid of understanding, Job would try to get an explanation for his suffering from God himself, because only God has real wisdom (12:13). In fact for his wonder Job also sees that the tents of the evil doers are often protected by God: "The tents of robbers are at peace, and those who provoke God are secure, who bring their god in their hands" (12:6). Through this allegation Job is in fact attacking the dogmatization of the principle of retribution. Although the principle is based on the experience of generations, this does not have an absolute value (12:7-12). Real wisdom is not with the wise of the earth but only with God.

By repeating the old wisdom slogans in order to interpret all human experience, the friends of Job have become worthless physicians: "As for you, you whitewash with lies; all of you are worthless physicians. If you would only keep silent, that would be your wisdom" (13:4-5). It would be better if they kept silence about the things of

which they do not know anything. His friends, openly says Job, have become liars in the name of God: "Hear now my reasoning, and listen to the pleadings of my lips. Will you speak falsely for God, and speak deceitfully for him? Will you show partiality toward him, will you plead the case for God?" (13:6-8). In fact God does not need their lies. It is the lack of fear of God that persuades them to do so. Their measures of judgment are simply human maxims: "Your maxims are proverbs of ashes, your defenses are defenses of clay" (13:12).

Job knows that he is innocent and he is even ready to argue his case with God. Now therefore he has two prayers to God: 1) he wants God to remove his mighty hand from Job so that he will not be terrified; 2) after removing his hand from him let God ask him the reasons for his actions, then he would answer (13:20-28). Job wants to know from God what his iniquities are (13:23). He thinks that God is bringing sufferings on him. Again Job laments over the vanity of human life which is in fact hopeless than a simple tree (14:1-22); he asks God why he watches over such a small being and fills their life with suffering: "A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble, comes up like a flower and withers, flees like a shadow and does not last. Do you fix your eyes on such a one? Do you bring me into judgment with you? Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? No one can" (14:1-4).

When Job seemed to challenge God, Eliphaz became angry and started to rebuke him: "Should the wise answer with windy knowledge, and fill themselves with the east wind? Should they argue in unprofitable talk, or in words with which they can do no good? But you are doing away with the fear of God, and hindering meditation before God" (15:2-4). Job pretends to know more than his friends; therefore the irritated Eliphaz asks him the following questions: "Have you listened in the council of God? And do you limit wisdom to yourself? What do you know that we do not know? What do you understand that is not clear to us? The gray-haired and the aged are on our side, those older than your father" (15:8-10).

It is true, as Job said, that one who is born of a woman can never be clean; however, experience of the older generations teach that the principle of retribution is still valid: "I will show you; listen to me; what I have seen I will declare -- what sages have told, and their ancestors have not hidden, to whom alone the land was given, and no stranger passed among them. The wicked writher in pain all their days, through

all the years that are laid up for the ruthless. Terrifying sounds are in their ears; in prosperity the destroyer will come upon them. They despair of returning from darkness, and they are destined for the sword" (15:17-22). Eliphaz thinks that the wicked will be stubborn (like Job) against God (15:25). He concludes his speech by reaffirming the theory of retribution: "...they (evil doers) will not be rich, and their wealth will not endure, nor will they strike root in the earth..." (15:26-35).

Job's response to Eliphaz is the same as before: "I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all. Have windy words no limit? Or what provokes you that you keep on talking?" (16:2-3). He continues: "I also could talk as you do, if you were in my place; I could join words together against you, and shake my head at you" (16:4). Job then tries to explain his experience to them. God has afflicted him (16:6-15), even though he is innocent (16:16-17); still he believes that he has a true witness in heaven (16:19). Now his prayer to God is this: "Since you have closed their minds (of the wise) to understanding, therefore you will not let them triumph" (17:4). Job truly believes that even if all the wise of the earth come together, they will not have the wisdom to interpret the reason for his suffering (17:10-16), because God has closed their minds from understanding (cf. 17:4). Job does not think that the traditional wisdom and theories can help him to understand the cause of his suffering.

Bildad now responds to Job from the very traditional principle that Job 'rejects.' He invites Job to stop arguing and reflect seriously about his life (18:2-4). Looking at Job and his experience, he narrates the evil things that will happen to the wrongdoers (18:5-22).

When Job heard these repeated accusation based on the traditional wisdom principle, which according to him had been proven to be false, he became angry. In pain he asked them the following: "How long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words?" (19:2). He accused them for interpreting his humiliation in favor of them to say that they are better than him (19:5). He really believes and says that all these are done to him by God whose plans are unknown. Anguished, Job then recalls the sufferings that he undergoes: "Know then that God has put me in the wrong, and closed his net around me. Even when I cry out, 'Violence!' I am not answered; I call aloud, but there is no justice. He has walled up my way so that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths" (19:6-8); "My breath is

repulsive to my wife; I am loathsome to my own family. Even young children despise me; when I rise, they talk against me" (19:17-18); "My bones cling to my skin and to my flesh, and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth" (19:20).

In between the memories of his sufferings, Job has hope in God: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!" (19:25-27). If Job had held only the traditional wisdom principle of retribution, he would not have found a similar door of hope in God. Job now advises them not to make mistakes by fanatically holding to the traditional principle: "If you say, 'How we will persecute him!' and, 'The root of the matter is found in him'; be afraid of the sword, for wrath brings the punishment of the sword, so that you may know there is a judgment" (19:28-29).

This warning of Job made Zophar intolerant. He once again emphatically stated the traditional principle that he had learned: "Do you not know this from of old, ever since mortals were placed on earth, that the exulting of the wicked is short, and the joy of the godless is but for a moment? Even though they mount up high as the heavens, and their head reaches to the clouds, they will perish forever like their own dung; those who have seen them will say, 'Where are they?' They will fly away like a dream, and not be found; they will be chased away like a vision of the night. The eye that saw them will see them no more, nor will their place behold them any longer. Their children will seek the favor of the poor, and their hands will give back their wealth. Their bodies, once full of youth, will lie down in the dust with them" (20:4-11); "They will suck the poison of asps; the tongue of a viper will kill them" (20:16); "They will give back the fruit of their toil, and will not swallow it down; from the profit of their trading they will get no enjoyment" (20:18); "The possessions of their house will be carried away, dragged off in the day of God's wrath. This is the portion of the wicked from God, the heritage decreed for them by God" (20:28-29). Most of these curses that Zophar utters are similar to those evil already suffered by Job. Zophar thus tried to establish that the reason for Job's suffering was his own evil works.

Now Job repeats the warning because his friends feel that they are representatives of God knowing his will. As a result, whenever

Job speaks and opens his mind before God, his friends react violently. He asks his friends to be careful about the punishment that awaits them before saying something in the name of God: "As for me, is my complaint addressed to mortals? Why should I not be impatient? Look at me, and be appalled, and lay your hand upon your mouth. When I think of it I am dismayed, and shuddering seizes my flesh" (21:4-6).

After this warning he asks his friends to explain some of the difficult things in life that do not support the theory of retribution: "Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? Their children are established in their presence, and their offspring before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them" (21:7-9); "You say, 'God stores up their iniquity for their children.' Let it be paid back to them, so that they may know it" (21:19); "One dies in full prosperity, being wholly at ease and secure, his loins full of milk and the marrow of his bones moist. Another dies in bitterness of soul, never having tasted of good. They lie down alike in the dust, and the worms cover them" (21:23-26); "Have you not asked those who travel the roads, and do you not accept their testimony, that the wicked are spared in the day of calamity, and are rescued in the day of wrath?" (21:29-30; cf. vv 7-33). Having asked this series of difficult questions which the principle of retribution will find difficult to answer, Job concludes his speech by declaring that his friends are unable to console him with their explanation of his suffering: "How then will you comfort me with empty nothings? There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood" (21:34). Their wisdom is incapable of understanding the reason for the suffering of Job and thus false.

Eliphaz who is convinced of his knowledge that it is true, now explicitly accuses Job of inequity (22:5-9). He sarcastically asked thus to Job: "Is it for your piety that he reproves you, and enters into judgment with you?" (22:4). Referring to Job's previous arguments he advises him to recognize his evil (22:12-20). He asks Job to recognize his injustice and return to God (22:21-28). The reason for this advice is also stated: "When others are humiliated, you say it is pride, for he saves the humble. He will deliver even those who are guilty; they will escape because of the cleanness of your hands" (22:29-30). Even in this speech Eliphaz did not forget to restate his basic theory (cf. 22:19-20). Through these Eliphaz was in fact affirming his wisdom which according to him contained the will of God, who dwelt above in the heavens (cf. vv 12-13).

Job now comes up with his higher theology. He reiterates his suffering and thinks that God is the one who brings all these upon him; he wants to meet God and to know from his mouth what the cause of his suffering is. He is even ready to argue with God (23:1-7). He is convinced of the fact that he is innocent and that he has always obeyed God's commands: "My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth" (23:11-12). Although Job wishes to see God, he is not found: "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him" (23:8-9). On the one hand thus Job is unable to find God, on the other hand he knows that God sits above and does all what he thinks and plans (23:13-14). Now Job is therefore terrified (23:15-17) because he knows that God will bring to the end the plan that he has designed for Job (23:14). Still Job is sure that after he has gone through all these sufferings, he will come out like purified gold (23:10). In fact God has a plan for each and every individual.

Job then challenges the dogmatized theory of retribution by which his friends try to set a boundary to God's work (24:1-8). It is human experience that the wicked are often prospering. Often the suffering poor cry to God for help but they are not heard: "From the city the dying groan, and the throat of the wounded cries for help; yet God pays no attention to their prayer" (24:12). Instead of destroying the wicked, God often appears to protect them even though later they might be destroyed: "They harm the childless woman, and do no good to the widow. Yet God prolongs the life of the mighty by his power; they rise up when they despair of life. He gives them security, and they are supported; his eyes are upon their ways. They are exalted a little while, and then are gone; they wither and fade like the mallow; they are cut off like the heads of grain" (24:21-24). Job therefore thinks that God's mind is unsearchable; he now challenges his friends to prove the contrary.

Job's questions really appear difficult to answer. Through them his friends are almost brought to silence. Bildad then wants only to restate a general wisdom principle that God sits high in the heavens and a mortal can never be righteous before him: "How then can a mortal be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure" (25:4).

The response of Job to Bildad is a long discourse. After having narrated many wonderful things done by God but for God are only small things, Job asks the following question: "These are indeed but the outskirts of his ways; and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power, who can understand?" (26:14). Job next declares that his friends are fools: "As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the almighty, who has made my soul bitter, as long as my breath is in me and the spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit. Far be it from me to say that you are right; until I die I will not put away my integrity from me..." (27:2-6). He continues: "May my enemy be like the wicked, and may my opponent be like the unrighteous. For what is the hope of the godless when God cuts them off, when God takes away their lives? Will God hear their cry when trouble comes upon them? Will they take delight in the Almighty? Will they call upon God at all times? I will teach you concerning the hand of God; that which is with the almighty I will not conceal. All of you have seen it yourselves; why then have you become altogether vain?" (27:7-12). Job is now ready to teach the wisdom coming from God and does not wish to cover his plans (cf. 27:11). He is wondering why his friends, after having seen the works of God, keep silence about this (cf. 27:12).

After having thus rejected the wisdom of his friends marking it as foolishness, Job makes a supreme discourse on the elusiveness of wisdom in the following part (Job 28). The main question here asked by Job is this: "Where shall wisdom be found?" It is not found on the earth and no valuable thing on earth can be paid for it as a price. No one knows the way to the place where wisdom abides. Only the creator knows the way to that place. God who creates wisdom and knows her dwelling has the following to say to humankind: "Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" (28:28). By showing his faith in God even amidst his severe sufferings and making a supreme discourse on wisdom, Job rejects all the affirmations of his friends. They thought that they were wise and that they knew what wisdom was; they got this conviction through their experience. Now Job rejects their position and says that only God has wisdom and only he knows the way to the abode of wisdom: "Mortals do not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living" (28:13). Since they have not shown mercy to their suffering friend, they have no fear of God; consequently they have no wisdom, but are fools.

Further, Job narrates his experiences which show that in his life he has followed only righteousness (Job 29-31). Holding on to the principle of retribution and having done only good things in life, he expected a prosperous life. He was a good and a respected person in his society (Job 29), but now they despise him. He did not oppress the orphans and widows; instead, he was the defender of the weak. He did not wish the death of even his enemies; his mind was never filled with evil thoughts. Still God persecuted him with all the present sufferings. His experience shows that the theory of retribution is not exclusively applicable to all situations.

In fact God is free to do what he wants (Job 30-31). Now Job requests God to weigh him in a just balance and recognize his integrity (31:6). If Job gets a chance to argue with God face to face, he would do this because Job is convinced of his integrity. The consciousness of being righteous persuades Job even to challenge God: "Oh, that I had one to hear me! (Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!) Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary! Surely I would carry it on my shoulder; I would bind it on me like a crown; I would give him an account of all my steps; like a prince I would approach him. "If my land has cried out against me, and its furrows have wept together; if I have eaten its yield without payment, and caused the death of its owners; let thorns grow instead of wheat, and foul weeds instead of barley..." (31:35-40). Having been thus challenged by Job, in the coming chapters God would answer Job.

The foregoing discussion between Job and his friends show that the principle of retribution had become a dogmatized and unchallenged theory. If this theory is thus accepted, God would be bound to act in a certain way. Holding this theory, Job's friends argued in all possible ways that Job had sinned because he was suffering. The argument seems to be the following: God being righteous rewards the good and punishes the evil; punishment of God appears in the form of suffering; Job suffers pain which implies that he has done something wrong; so Job should sincerely confess his sins and reconcile with God.

Throughout the discussion, therefore, his friends were trying to convince Job of his iniquity. Job on his part, holding the same principle, saw that this manner of application of the theory was not true; he had not committed any evil. That means that God was acting capriciously. So Job violently defended his innocence before his friends. He was

even ready to argue his case before God and wanted God to reward his good works. The friends of Job, although were unable to bring any new arguments, were not in a disposition to accept Job's argument. The discussion between the four thus came to a dead lock and a reasonable answer would be appreciated.

Now there appears a new character, Elihu (literally meaning 'he is my God'), in the scene although the narrator does not tell the reader where does he come from. The story introduces Elihu with the following words: "So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. Then Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became angry. He was angry at Job because he justified himself rather than God; he was angry also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, though they had declared Job to be in the wrong. Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job, because they were older than he. But when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouths of these three men, he became angry. Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite answered: "I am young in years, and you are aged; therefore I was timid and afraid to declare my opinion to you" (32:1-5). Elihu should be seen as the representative of God who comes to give a response to the accusations raised by Job against God.

The sages used to think that when a man grows old, he would have more experience and consequently would become wiser. Elihu now rejects this traditional view: "Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite answered: "I am young in years, and you are aged; therefore I was timid and afraid to declare my opinion to you. I said, 'Let days speak, and many years teach wisdom.' But truly it is the spirit in a mortal, the breath of the almighty that makes for understanding. It is not the old that are wise nor the aged that understand what is right" (32:6-9). He rebuked the friends of Job because they were unable to convince Job of his real mistake (32:11-22); he also rebuked Job for his self justification. Job was complaining that even though he was just, God was terrifying him (cf. 23:1-17; 33:9-11). So Elihu now speaks for God and since he is a man like Job he should not have any fear of him (33:6-7). If Job says that he is innocent and God is responsible for his sufferings (cf. 33:9-11), then Job should know that God is greater than any mortal (33:12). God speaks once in one way and in another time in another way (33:14). Man is unable to grasp this. That means that man cannot define all the divine actions. God is free to do what he wants.

God sometimes terrifies man through dreams and visions in order to rub out his pride (33:15-17). He disciplines man by giving him suffering (33:19). Elihu thus says that all suffering is not the consequence of sin; it might also be the result of a divine disciplining. He thus rejected the tendency of some sages to dogmatize the theory of retribution. Their arguments -- of the friends of Job -- are thus rejected. Notably, Elihu also rejects the attitude of Job. Job was accusing God thinking that his suffering was the result of the enmity of God (19:20; 30:16-19, 30-31); moreover, while trying to justify himself and challenging God of his righteousness, Job was also acting according to the same principle. He expected a good life because in his eyes he was just. Instead of clinging himself to this theory which he himself tries to reject, he has to give heed to the word of God in his sufferings. Only thus he can be wise (33:31-33).

The discussion between Job and his friends were in relation to the works of God and in the name of God. So now Elihu tries to explain who really God is, what his works are, and how one should accept his life experiences. Job was complaining that it was useless to practice righteousness because one will not be rewarded accordingly (34:9). In fact, God does not do any injustice; he rewards each one according to his works (34:10-12). Actually, God makes a close watch over the works of man and rewards him accordingly (34:21-22:26). Fearing that he would be misunderstood by foolish men, God does not change his plans. If Job has become impatient before such a small trial, what would have happened if God had tested him to the end? (34:36).

'What is the reward of the righteous and what is the benefit in keeping oneself away from evil?' asks Job (35:1-3). If one among the human beings becomes just or unjust God has no special advantage or disadvantage. He is greater than man. Evil committed by men will not affect God; it affects only some other human beings (35:7-8). Further, Job thinks that he is wiser than others because he now has more experience than others; however, the wisdom of Job, who does not accept the God-given life as it is, is foolishness (33:12; 34:7-9, 35; 35:16); he has only empty words. Elihu asks him to give heed to his words because he is a wise man. The righteousness of God is beyond human grasp; he destroys the wrongdoers; he protects the right of the righteous; he will not withdraw his eyes from them (36:6-7). The Godless do not cry for God's help (36:13). Notably, what happens in

the case of Job is only a disciplining: "He delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity" (36:15).

In fact, God wanted to lead Job through his afflictions to a broad place where there is no constraint (36:16); however Job failed God through his impatience (36:17). Personal convictions and evaluations will lead only to scoffing. Instead of counting his righteous actions and accusing God, Job has to accept the God-given life as it is (36:18-19) because God is greater than man (36:24-26); man is inefficient to understand God's works (36:29-33): "God thunders wondrously with his voice; he does great things that we cannot comprehend" (37:5; see also vv 14, 15).

In order to elucidate this point to Job, Elihu then asks a number of unanswerable questions to him: "Do you know how God lays his command upon them, and causes the lightning of his cloud to shine? Do you know the balancing of the clouds, the wondrous works of the one whose knowledge is perfect, you whose garments are hot when the earth is still because of the south wind? Can you, like him, spread out the skies, hard as a molten mirror? ... Should he be told that I want to speak? Did anyone ever wish to be swallowed up? ..." (37:15-21). Elihu concludes his discourse on wisdom with the following words: "The almighty - we cannot find him - he is great in power and justice, and abundant righteousness he will not violate. Therefore mortals fear him; he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit" (37:23-24). Since God is greater than man and he is a righteous and transcendent God, man has to trust in him and thus accept the life as it is given to him.

When the friends of Job tried to interpret the suffering of Job with the help of their traditional wisdom, Job saw that their interpretation was unjust and that their wisdom was unable to explain all human experience. Since Job also had all the wisdom that his friends had, and he had gone through more experience than his friends, while maintaining his hope in God even amidst his afflictions, Job rightly thought that he had more wisdom than his friends. This Job is now challenged by God through Elihu and brought to the viewpoint that his thoughts are not of a really wise person.

At this point God himself comes down in a whirlwind to meet Job's accusations. By directing his attention to things that he sees every day, but does not know the reason of the happening and to those things the knowledge of which show only the ignorance of man, God

teaches him real wisdom: "... "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements -- surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? "Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? -- when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped"? "Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? ... Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? ... "Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you? ..." (38:1-41). It is not because of the wisdom of Job or any other human being that the world moves as it is now (38:1-39:30). After asking questions that are difficult to answer, God challenges the 'wise Job' to give answers to these questions: "Shall a faultfinder contend with the almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond" (40:12).

Job now comprehending his foolishness and lack of wisdom makes the following apology to God: "See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further" (40:4-5). Job is declaring that he will no more come up with questions. He now understands that he is nothing before God.

Although Job now understands his nothingness before God, this thought alone is not enough to be a really wise man. God therefore continues his questions to Job. Notably, although Job had rejected in principle the theory of retribution, he was still holding on to the same theory for his own advantage and thinking that God was in some way obliged to reward him according to his good works. In fact he was accusing God for his unjust mode of action (40:8). So God again asks him a chain of questions, which reveal on the one hand the glory of God and on the other hand the nothingness of Job: "...Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down its tongue with a cord? Can you put a rope in its nose, or pierce its jaw with a hook? Will it make many supplications to you? ... Who has given to me, that I should repay him? ... (40:9-41:34).

Job could not utter even a word as answer to these questions; so he merely said the following: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:2-6). Job now confesses that he had spoken a lot of things about God thinking that he was a wise man although he did not know anything. Now he knows that he has only heard about God. That means that once Job has seen God, he learns to accept his life as it is given to him and he finds reconciliation with God submitting himself fully to the plan of God.

The discussion between Job and his friends originated from a search into the cause of his suffering. Job's life became troublesome and he even had to sit in ashes; this was unacceptable for the 'righteous Job' who began to lament about his life and accuse God for this 'injustice.' His friends however found a reason for these sufferings by employing the theory of retribution: Job suffered evil because Job sinned. Notably, when Job met God face to face, he was enabled to take his life as it is. He confessed his readiness to sit in ashes. He did not complain anything more but only confessed his foolishness. In fact with all their wisdom, neither Job nor his friends could explain the reason behind the suffering of Job. The rationale is the following: "God speaks in one way, and in two, though people do not perceive it" (33:14). Man does not comprehend all these. In fact man is unable to bring God and his actions subject to human definitions because human intelligence is too little to grasp God's actions.

God is greater than man and his thoughts. Man does not know the way to real wisdom. When Job accepted his life without complaints and with humility, God recognized him as wise (42:7). At the same time, God rejected the method of employing traditional theory of retribution for defining all the works of God: "...the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7).

In the Book of Job, the sages were trying to explain the reason for the suffering of the innocent people. In response to the challenge of

the suffering Job, God appeared to him, but this was not to explain him the reason for his suffering, or to hear the arguments of Job, but to show his foolishness. It was also revealed that Job's suffering was the will of God. This explanation drastically differs from the other Ancient Near Eastern discussions on theodicy which found the reason of human suffering in the caprice of gods. The sages, through biblical Job, wanted to teach that real wisdom is unattainable; God is greater than man and God's thoughts are different from that of man; man must accept his life as it is given to him by the creator. Each one has to accept his life as it is and should have a personal encounter with God through the creation. The sages also wanted to teach that by holding theories that appear reasonable, one should not make the lives of other people more difficult.

End Notes

- ⁵⁵ Cf. G. E. Mendenhall, *Ancient Israel's Faith and History: An Introduction to the Bible in Context*, Louisville, John Knox, 2001, 189-190; authors suggest various dates ranging from tenth to second century B.C., but most scholars set it between seventh and fifth century B.C.; cf. J. Roberts, "Job and the Israelite Religious Tradition," *ZAW* 89 (1977) 107-114. Linguistic studies show that the prose is not older than sixth century B.C.; cf. A. Hurvitz, "The Date of the Prose Tale of Job Linguistically Reconsidered," *HTR* 67 (1974) 17-34; C.A. Newson, "The Book of Job: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *IB* IV, 325.
- ⁵⁶ Cf. J.L. Crenshaw, "Wisdom," in *Old Testament Form Criticism*, ed. J.H. Hayes, San Antonio, 1974, 235-255.
- ⁵⁷ Cf. C. Breytenbach and P.L. Day, "Satan," *DDD*, 727-728

Chapter 5

Ecclesiastes

The Ecclesiastes has derived from its Hebrew name Qoheleth, which is the feminine participle of the root qhl (cf. 1:1; 12:8), which most probably refers to the office of assembling the people; LXX and Vulgate therefore translate the title as Ecclesiastes. The literary form and structure of the book is highly disputed.⁵⁸ It is often seen as a book that propagates pessimism and importance of chance⁵⁹ because in the beginning and at the end of the book it is stated that all is vanity (1:2; 12:8). Scholars, by and large, think that Ecclesiastes was written by a thinker of the third century B.C.⁶⁰ This conclusion is drawn from the presence of Greek notions and thoughts in the book; the book exhibits the "philosophical" spirit of the Hellenistic period.⁶¹ That means that Ecclesiastes was written after the formation of Proverbs and even after the composition of the Book of Job. Since fragments of Ecclesiastes appear in Qumran cave 4, the text should not be later than mid-second century. Although the author introduces himself as the son of David and king of Jerusalem (1:1), the verses in the book are more of a subject than a king (cf. 4:13-16; 7:19-22; 8:2-9, 16-18); moreover, David had no son called Qoheleth. In fact

Qoheleth often speaks as a teacher than a king.⁶² The author seems to adopt the image of a king just to underline the universal validity of his teaching and to show the importance of chance that plays even in the life of persons like that of a prosperous king.⁶³

If one reads this book in its historico-theological setting, it appears to be a reaction, like that of Job, against the dogmatization of the idea that by acquiring more and more wisdom one can find happiness on earth (taught by the sages through several proverbs and psalms; cf. e.g., Prov 3:13-18; also Ps 37). The sages used to teach that man should always strive for knowledge and wisdom so that his life should find success and happiness on earth. Qoheleth seems to reject the dogmatization of this idea. The following example elucidates this point:

"I said to myself, I have acquired great wisdom,
Surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me;
And my mind has had great experience of wisdom And knowledge.
And I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know Madness
and folly.
I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind.
For in much wisdom is much vexation,
And those who increase knowledge increase sorrow" (1:16-18).

According to Qoheleth, it is foolishness to think of making life happy and successful simply by acquiring wisdom (cf. 9:13-16). Qoheleth is in search of an answer to the problem "How the wise man dies just like the fool?" (2:16). He sees that "(the same) fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good man, so is the sinner; and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath" (9:2). Man can never be absolutely sure that proper behavior will ensure him success and promised happiness by instructions and sayings of the sages. Sinners might find success as if they are righteous and righteous might be punished like sinners (8:10-15). We have already seen that the link between acquisition of wisdom and happiness is more evident in Proverb 1-9 which is of late origin probably coming from the early post exilic period. The reaction of Qoheleth seems to go against this trend among the sages.

Against the dogmatized notion of making happiness and success through acquiring wisdom, Qoheleth states in the beginning and at the

end of his work that all life is vanity: "Vanity of vanities, says Qoheleth, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (1:2; 12:8). The sages of the old thought that the creator had established a moral order and the wise could understand this and adjust their lives with this order in such a way that they would meet only success in life. They encouraged people to acquire wisdom as the way of striving for success. Experience like that of Job, however, showed that such a conception was not absolutely true. Chance often played a great role in the life of man. Since a remote God controls the things on earth, and at the time of death no privilege is given to the righteous, it is absurd to think of gaining wisdom and making life happy. Notably, the book also seems to be a mature reaction of a sage against the dogmatization of the principle of retribution taught by the sage through Proverbs. This seems to be the suggestion of the following text:

"¹¹ All this I laid to heart, examining it all,
How the righteous and the wise and their deeds
Are in the hand of God;
Whether it is love or hate one does not know.
Everything that confronts them ² is vanity,
Since the same fate comes to all,
To the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil,
To the clean and the unclean,
To those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice.
As are the good, so are the sinners;
Those who swear are like those who shun an oath.
³ This is an evil in all that happens under the sun,
That the same fate comes to everyone.
Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil;
Madness is in their hearts while they live,
And after that they go to the dead" (9:1-3).

It is foolishness to think that man always receives according to his works. The reason is that God's mind and plan are incomprehensible for man:

"¹⁶ When I applied my mind to know wisdom,
And to see the business that is done on earth,
How one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night,

¹⁷ Then I saw all the work of God,
That no one can find out what is happening under the sun.
However much they may toil in seeking,
They will not find it out;
Even though those who are wise claim to know,
They cannot find it out" (8:16-17; cf. also 3:11; 11:5).

On the one hand Qoheleth wanted to teach that the dogma-tization of certain principles which are not proved through experience was wrong and on the other hand he declared that man had got his limitations. Dogmatization is the result of exaggeration. A wise man should not exaggerate things; in fact, for Qoheleth, moderation in life is the best way to find happiness in life. The following passage will explain this:

¹⁵ In my vain life I have seen everything;
There are righteous people
Who perish in their righteousness,
And there are wicked people
Who prolong their life in their evildoing.
¹⁶ Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise;
Why should you destroy yourself?
¹⁷ Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool;
Why should you die before your time?
¹⁸ It is good that you should take hold of the one,
Without letting go of the other;
For the one who fears God shall succeed with both" (7:15-18).
"Surely there is no one on earth so righteous
As to do good without ever sinning" (7:20).

In order to comprehend the thoughts of Qoheleth, one should also keep in mind the general theological background of the author. The point is that even during the time of Qoheleth people did not begin to think of the life after death:

³ This is an evil in all that happens under the sun,
That the same fate comes to everyone.
Moreover, the hearts of all are full of evil;
Madness is in their hearts while they live,
And after that they go to the dead.

⁴ But whoever is joined with all the living has hope,
For a living dog is better than a dead lion.
⁵ The living know that they will die,
But the dead know nothing;
They have no more reward,
And even the memory of them is lost" (9:3-5).
¹⁹ For the fate of humans
And the fate of animals is the same;
As one dies, so dies the other.
They all have the same breath,
And humans have no advantage over the animals; For all is vanity.
²⁰ All go to one place;
All are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.
²¹ Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward,
And the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?" (3:19-21).

Even then Qoheleth believed in the existence of God and the judgment that the human being had to expect from him. Having this faith in God as the basis, Qoheleth was trying to find answer to the question "how can one make the given short life happy and successful."

Although rejected the dogmatization of the principle of retribution, Qoheleth basically believed that God was righteous and that he would reward each one according to his works (8:10-13). The works of God, however, are hidden from human comprehension; this is what experience teaches him. Man's search for knowledge would reveal the works of God one after the other, but man is unable to comprehend all divine actions. Actually man should not try to define divine actions:

¹³ Consider the work of God;
Who can make straight what he has made crooked?
¹⁴ In the day of prosperity be joyful,
And in the day of adversity consider;
God has made the one as well as the other,
So that mortals may not find out anything
That will come after them" (7:13-14). Even though this is so
"Wisdom is as good as an inheritance,
An advantage to those who see the sun" (7:11)

Qoheleth meant that man had to hold on to a moderate notion of things and that everyone had a chance to live and the possibility of coming under calamities:

¹¹ Again I saw that under the sun
The race is not to the swift,
Nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise,
Nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful;
But time and chance happen to them all.

¹² For no one can anticipate the time of disaster.
Like fish taken in a cruel net,
And like birds caught in a snare,
So mortals are snared at a time of calamity,
When it suddenly falls upon them" (9:11-12).

Even if one employs his whole energy and sincerely tries to understand, he would not know what is going to happen to him in future:

⁷ Indeed, they do not know what is to be,
For who can tell them how it will be?

⁸ No one has power over the wind to restrain the wind,
Or power over the day of death;
There is no discharge from the battle,
Nor does wickedness deliver those who practice it" (8:7-8). So what is desirable is this:
"Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire;
This also is vanity and a chasing after wind" (6:9).

Since man is unable to define everything in the world, and his mind is inefficient to grasp every happening on earth, Qoheleth advises his hearers to accept life as it is given to him and enjoy the happiness that God gives him (3:22). God has given life and existence to man; he has also given him a time for everything:

¹ For everything there is a season,
And a time for every matter under heaven:
² A time to be born, and a time to die;
A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
³ A time to kill, and a time to heal;
A time to break down, and a time to build up;
⁴ A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ A time to throw away stones,
And a time to gather stones together;
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
⁶ A time to seek, and a time to lose;
A time to keep, and a time to throw away;
⁷ A time to tear, and a time to sew;
A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
⁸ A time to love, and a time to hate;
A time for war, and a time for peace" (3:1-8).
"For every matter has its time and way,
Although the troubles of mortals lie heavy upon them" (8:6).

Man has to use the time given to him and to prosper in life. God has also given a sense of past and a sense of future to man (3:11). As a result man knows from experience that something has already gone and something else will come; therefore, for each one, the desirable thing is to take the present life as it is given: when God gives happiness, enjoy this; when God gives sufferings, do not lament over this. It is foolishness if man does not recognize the God-given time of joy or suffering.

Notably, Qoheleth was trying to analyze the life of a man in the context of his lifelong (total) experience. As a result, he had to question several dogmatic principles of the then existing society because although dogmatized they were not totally true. The sages in Qoheleth were trying to find answer to the question 'how could one make life happy on earth?'; analyzing the whole life of a man, Qoheleth came to the conclusion that moderation was the greatest virtue that could bring happiness. He watched all the persons around him; being a moderate, he not only rejected the dogmatization of the principle of retribution, but also rejected the views of those who totally opposed this theory:

¹³ It will not be well with the wicked,
Neither will they prolong their days like a shadow,
Because they do not stand in fear before God.
¹⁴ There is a vanity that takes place on earth,
That there are righteous people who are treated
According to the conduct of the wicked,
And there are wicked people who are treated

According to the conduct of the righteous.

I said that this also is vanity" (8:13-14).

Qoheleth watched that all those people who worked hard in their life and those who always sought wisdom (1:16-17), those who worked hard to make money (4:6-8; 5:10-13), those who destroyed themselves just to show that they were righteous (7:15-16), those who were rash with their mouths and quick in uttering words in the house of God (5:1-4), those who did injustice because they had authority (5:8-9), those who were unable to enjoy life although they possessed everything that they wished to have (6:1-2), those who destroyed themselves because they believed that a certain idea was true (7:15-18; 8:1-5), those who were trapped by wicked women (7:26-29), those wise and those fools (9:13-17), although wise, but were destroyed by their own little foolishness (10:1-3), and so on. He evaluated the life of these people in the context of their whole life and from that assessment he concluded that moderation was the best way that man could adopt for the whole life.

Even if one makes a life-time search, one may not become wise (1:12-18; 5:13-14; 6:2); even if one works hard, he may not be able to enjoy its good fruits (2:21); even if one strives hard to execute righteousness, he may not find success (7:15); even if one shows great devotion in the temple, he may not find great success (5:4); even if one misuses authority, he may not find much gain (5:8); although one has everything, he may not find satisfaction and happiness (6:2); even if one is ready to die for a principle, he may not be an advocate of truth (8:17). So what is desirable for man is to enjoy the happy things that God has given him in life:

"¹⁸ This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. ¹⁹ Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil -- this is the gift of God" (5:18-19). Looking at the dead, Qoheleth will exhort the following: "⁶ Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun.⁷ Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. ⁸ Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking

on your head. ⁹ Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun" (9:6-9; cf. also 2:24; 3:12-13; 5:18-19; 8:15; 11:9).

Qoheleth lived in a society which was characterized by injustice and violence (cf. 3:16; 4:1; 8:1-3, 9); poor people could not do much against this; moreover, people at that time did not believe in life after death, which meant that man had nothing to expect after this life on earth. In such a situation, the exhortation to enjoy the God-given life was very practical and reasonable because the sages were in fact trying to find the way to make human life happier.

The thoughts of Qoheleth do not come from a secular mind, but from the fear of God. He makes precise comments on what should one do when he goes to the temple, how prudently should one take his oaths before God and how should one be diligent in fulfilling them: "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools; ... Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few. ... When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; ... Fulfill what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake; why should God be angry at your words, and destroy the work of your hands? With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words, but fear God" (5:1-7).

In fact throughout his exhortations, Qoheleth advises his hearers to fear God (3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12; 12:14). Man should fear God and enjoy life because "¹² I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³ moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. ¹⁴ I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him" (3:12-14). Man the image of God should fear his Master and enjoy the life given to him: this is the will of God.

Qoheleth saw man basically as a social animal. In a social set up or group life, the virtue of moderation in everything is more helpful

than dogmatized ideas. The life style and happiness of each and every individual will also affect the other persons in that society; so one has to evaluate his life in the context of his life together with others. Exaggerated execution of some ideas and theological notions will only make life difficult.

The advice of Qoheleth, who has reached the end of his life and now knows that God has given a time for everything in life, to the young man is the following: "Rejoice, young man, while you are young, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. 10 Banish anxiety from your mind, and put away pain from your body; for youth and the dawn of life are vanity. 12:1 Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them..." (11:9-12:1).

Together with the above said great things, Qoheleth also gives several practical instructions and sayings that would help one to find success:

"If the anger of the ruler rises against you,

Do not leave your post,

For calmness will undo great offenses" (10:4).

"8 Whoever digs a pit will fall into it;

And whoever breaks through a wall

Will be bitten by a snake.

9 Whoever quarries stones will be hurt by them;

And whoever splits logs will be endangered by them" (10:8-9).

"No one knows what is to happen,

And who can tell anyone what the future holds?" (10:14).

"Through sloth the roof sinks in,

And through indolence the house leaks" (10:18).

"The dust returns to the earth as it was,

And the breath returns to God who gave it" (12:7).

In a society which did not begin to think about life after death and where people often felt discouraged about the social injustice happening around, the advice to enjoy without reluctance the God-given happiness in life was a commendable idea. One should also remember that he will have to give an account of all these before God

(12:14). In the world created by God, man is never alone. The happiness, sorrow, life style, and philosophy of each person will affect others around him as well. What is desirable therefore is to be moderate and fear God in everything. Only those who value the occasions given to him by God can do this successfully, for everything in life has a time.

We have already mentioned that in Proverbs women did not get enough attention and often she was seen as a stumbling block to the success of man. Although Qoheleth criticized Pro-verbs for its vision on wisdom and retribution, he also followed the same defective vision of seeing women as a hindrance on the way of man (cf. 7:25-29). This would later be corrected by the sages in the Song of Songs.

Job and Ecclesiastes

Job and Ecclesiastes present mutually complementary ideas. One completes the other and they are the two sides of the same coin. Since God is the creator (the potter) of the universe and man, man should accept the life as it is given to him by the creator (Job 40:9-41:34). If one succeeds to do so, then he will be wise. If God gives great sufferings, man should not lose control but keep a balance of mind. This is the message of Job. Often God is trying to make people wise through sufferings. Those who are open to God will be disciplined through these sufferings and eventually they will become wise.

Although wisdom helps one to face life successfully, growth in wisdom does not give an absolute guarantee of happiness in life. Divine projects, which appear to be 'chances,' play an important role in the life of man. The creator has given man only a short life in which he has specified time for everything. Just as one has to take the sufferings as they are given, one can gladly enjoy the good things given by God. This is the will of God and is wisdom. One should enjoy life and praise God for this great happiness. By presenting these two complementary ideas the sages are rejecting the dogmatization of the principle of retribution and the theory of strong link between the acquisition of wisdom and happiness. The sages come to this conclusion because they believe that God the creator is greater than man and his plans are beyond human comprehension. God's actions cannot be bound by human definitions. He is free to act as he wills (Job 33:14). Man has to believe in God in such a way that everything given to him by God in life should be seen as a gift of the creator for the good of man.

In fact, in Job-Ecclesiastes there is no complete break from the teachings of Proverbs. They hold a moderate view on retribution taught by Proverbs. Even though Proverbs basically taught retribution, sometime it could also go beyond a rigid application of this theory. It could also point to the freedom exercised by God.

"The human mind plans the way,
But the Lord directs the steps" (16:9).
"The human mind may devise many plans,
But it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established" (19:21).
"All deeds are right in the sight of the doer,
But the Lord weighs the heart." (21:2; 16:2).
"All our steps are ordered by the Lord;
How then can we understand our own ways?" (20:24).
"No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel,
Can avail against the Lord.
The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
But the victory belongs to the Lord" (21:30-31).

Actually, Job and Ecclesiastes are developing this side of the Israelite traditional theology against an exaggerated application of the principle of retribution.

End Notes

- ⁵⁸ Cf. R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom in the Old Testament," 921; A. Wright, "The Riddle of the Sphinx: The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 30 (1968), 313-34; "The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 42 (1980), 38-51. Qoheleth uses literary types as autobiographical narrative, example story, anecdote, parable (often called an allegorical poem), antithesis, and proverb in many forms such as truth statements, "better" sayings, numerical sayings, instructions, traditional sayings, malediction, and benediction. Qoheleth had particular fondness for "better" sayings (4:3, 6, 9, 13; 5:5; 6:3, 9; 7:1, 2, 3, 5, 8; 9:4, 16, 18) and its emphatic form, "nothing is better" (2:24; 3:12, 22; 8:15); cf. J.L. Crenshaw, "Book of Ecclesiastes," *ABD* II, 275.
- ⁵⁹ Cf. H.P. Mueller, "Der unheimliche Gast. Zum Denken Qohelets," *ZThK* 84 (1987), 441-464; O. Kaiser, "Qohelet," in J. Day, Gordon, R.P. and Williamson H.G.M., eds, *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J.A. Emerton*, Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1995, 84-87 (83-93).
- ⁶⁰ Since the influence of Greek-Hellenistic writing and thought are demonstrable in

Qoheleth it should be the product of the third century; the literary style of the author including vocabulary and the historical situation reflected in the book support this suggestion; the students of Qoheleth seem to come from the upper class; cf. T. Kruger, *Kohelet (Prediger)*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener, BKAT, 2000; M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism I*, London, 1974, 115-128; J.L. Crenshaw, "Book of Ecclesiastes," *ABD* II 274-275; O. Kaiser, "Qohelet," 84; "Judentum und Hellenismus: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem hellenistischen Einfluss auf Qohelet und Jesus Sirach," *VuF* 27 (1982) 68-88; see also R. Braun, *Kohelet und die fruehhellenistische Popularphilosophie*, Berlin 1973.

- ⁶¹ Cf. J.L. Crenshaw, "Book of Ecclesiastes," 273.
- ⁶² Cf. J.L. Crenshaw, "Book of Ecclesiastes," 271.
- ⁶³ Cf. O. Kaiser, "Qohelet," 84-85.

Chapter 6

Song of Songs

Sex is one of the most important faculties and experiences in human life, which no person can avoid. According to Genesis, when God created man and woman, man recognized her as the bone of his bones and as the flesh of his flesh (Gen 2:23); they felt mutual attraction and became one single flesh. Even after the first transgression, God did not take away the gift of sex from their life. The sages considered sex as one of the most important divine gifts to man (cf. Eccl 9:9-10); experience showed it to be an incomprehensible mystery (cf. Prov 5:15-19; 30:18-19). Sages in Proverbs had taught the students to be vigilant about this gift ("Can a man carry fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned? ..." Prov 6:27-29; see also 5:15-19). The Song of Songs is an instruction on this divine gift to man.⁶⁴

Among the interpreters there is dispute with regard to whether the Song of Songs is one coherent work or it is an edited work that contains pre-existent popular songs. There is also dispute about the number of sub-units or songs. Some scholars have suggested six poems,

while some others eight; still others recognized twenty-five or more sub-units.⁶⁵ In our interpretation of the book we basically follow the interpretative key suggested by Kenton L. Sparks who finds the door to the meaning in the oaths in the Songs in which the protagonist of the story requires a decision from the daughters of Jerusalem (2:7; 3:5; 8:4).⁶⁶

Due to the diversity of viewpoints that appear in different sub-units or poems, Song of Songs appears to be a collection of love songs in which a young man and woman praise each other.⁶⁷ These might originally be love songs sung in homes for marriage celebrations that lasted almost one week in the Middle East.⁶⁸ The variety and contradictory character of themes in various parts suggest that Songs is not a single coherent story; it is a collection of traditional songs in which the editorial work tries to communicate a lesson on day-to-day life. Although authors did not find success in defining the genre of Song of Songs as a whole, they have suggested genres for the sub-sections: for example, yearning (e.g., 1:2-4), admiration (e.g., 1:12-14), reminiscence (e.g., 2:8-17), *wasf* (a description of the physical charms of the beloved, e.g., 4:1-7), boasting (e.g., 8:11-12), teasing (e.g., 2:14-15), and self-description (e.g., 1:5-6).⁶⁹

Not only because the name of Solomon was mentioned in the first (1:5), third (3:7, 9, 11), and the eighth (8:11-12) chapters of the book, and mention was made of the king (1:4, 12; 7:6), but also because Solomon was the greatest lover in the history of Israel (1King 3), and because the period of Solomon appeared to be the most suitable period to compose such songs, Song of Songs was traditionally attributed to Solomon as the composer. The author might also have thought of presenting it as the best product of Solomon's wisdom. This might have been the reason why it was accepted as canonical even giving it allegorical interpretations.⁷⁰ Today scholars, who seriously take the Aramaism found in the book, think that it was written at least at the end of the monarchic period. Since the book shows influence of Greek culture, many scholars think that the book was formed in the third century B.C. That means that Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs come from the same period.

There was a discussion among the Jewish rabbis whether the book was to be made part of the sacred writings because in the book there was no mention of the name of God and no religious ideas appeared

in it. At the end of long discussions, they accepted it as part of the sacred writings by giving it an allegorical interpretation according to which what was revealed in the Songs was the love between Israel and God. When the Church accepted this as part of the Holy Scriptures, it gave a similar interpretation according to which the love between Jesus and his bride-church was unveiled in the Songs.⁷¹ The scope of the present investigation is different. The main question asked here is this: why the Songs appear as part of the wisdom books?⁷²

Wisdom instructions are basically teachings that would help to make life successful. The sages were observing the whole universe and experiences that are repeated there. In this regard sexuality was one of the important human experiences. It was also the experience that without the gift of sex the humankind would not exist on the face of the earth. This was one of the main divine gifts to man (Gen 1:26-27; 2:23; 3:16). Experience taught the sage that this great and life giving gift of God should be protected with care. Carelessness would make this gift a curse in social life. When taken as instructions, Song of Songs appears to be advices on love and sex given by sages to young women (cf. 2:3-13; 3:6-5:1; 7:1-13; 8:5-7).

Like Job, and Ecclesiastes, Songs appears to be a complementary teaching to that of Proverbs. The Book of Proverbs, especially chapters 1-9 had been seen as teachings imparted by a father to his son (or teacher to a male student), and Proverbs as a whole gives a patriarchal worldview. Modern scholars divide Prov 1-9 into ten speeches introduced by a direct address "my son" (1) 1:8-19; (2) 2:1-22; (3) 3:1-12; (4) 3:21-35; (5) 4:1-9; (6) 4:10-19; (7) 4:20-27; (8) 5:1-23; (9) 6:20-35; (10) 7:1-27.⁷³ Although mothers should also have imparted wisdom to their daughters, this fact was not given sufficient importance in Proverbs. Although Job and Qoheleth were critical about the partial and exaggerated affirmations of Proverbs, they were unable to correct the 'anti-feminist' attitude of the same. Song of Songs seems to correct and complement this partial outlook of Proverbs by introducing a teaching imparted to young women by another sage woman.

In this book the antagonist is not women but man (in Proverbs it is loose woman). The protagonist in the Songs is identified as the Shulammit (6:13). She is the counterpart of Solomon who was the wisest of the sages and a great lover who was deceived through his

love for women (Prov 5:1-23; 7:1-27). Proverbs chapters 5 and 7 are spoken to young men to be aware of the lips of the loose woman; Songs, by contrast, is spoken to young women to be aware of the tempting words of men (cf. 1:9-11; 4:1-15).

In the Songs, the scenes are focalized through the eyes of a frustrated and unmarried woman who is in search of her lover (3:1-5; 5:2-8). Often she dreams herself as the bride of King Solomon in which she finds the fulfillment of love (3:1-4). This protagonist is frustrated because her love to her lover should be worked out secretly and she is afraid that her family would not accept this relationship (cf. 3:4; 8:1-2). Even though she is paying a high price for her love, this will not be valued by her society. Notably, the thesis in which young lovers struggle to express their affections in the face of social constraint is very common in the Ancient Near Eastern love poetry.⁷⁴ This might also imply that Song of Songs was the work of a female sage.⁷⁵

When people grow to youth, boys and girls would feel mutual attraction. Normally, each woman would also feel that she is the most beautiful lady and her lover is the most elegant and efficient man on earth (cf. Song 1:15; 2:1). The same feeling is shared by man as well; he thinks that his lover is the most beautiful woman on earth. Interestingly, it is human experience that all people have similar feeling in relation to their lovers in this stage of their life; so one has to be prudent in his actions in following his feelings. She/He should not let free her/his emotions to take control of her/his life (2:7, 15; 3:5; 5:9; 8:4). In fact, the sage is presenting the normal general thoughts and feelings that pass through the minds of the lovers. Although these thoughts are very common, if one lets his/her emotion to dominate him/her, he/she will have to bear serious consequences. The sage teaches this in the book through the discussions of the servants and brothers of the woman. The sage is warning the young women to guard the gift of sex, and informing them of the catastrophic consequences if one misuses this great divine favor. These points might be explained with the following examples. The woman says that her lover is the most elegant and efficient man on earth:

⁷⁶ As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
So is my beloved among young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
And his fruit was sweet to my taste" (2:3).

- ¹⁰ My beloved is all radiant and ruddy,
Distinguished among ten thousand.
- ¹¹ His head is the finest gold;
His locks are wavy, black as a raven.
- ¹² His eyes are like doves beside springs of water,
Bathed in milk, fitly set.
- ¹³ His cheeks are like beds of spices,
Yielding fragrance. His lips are lilies,
Distilling liquid myrrh.
- ¹⁴ His arms are rounded gold, set with jewels.
His body is ivory work, encrusted with sapphires.
- ¹⁵ His legs are alabaster columns, set upon bases of gold.
His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars.
- ¹⁶ His speech is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable.
This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem" (5:10-16).
"Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly lovely.
Our couch is green" (1:16).

The woman says that her lover brought her to love through his actions (this might simply be her imagination):

- ⁴ He brought me to the banqueting house,
And his intention toward me was love.
- ⁵ Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples;
For I am faint with love.
- ⁶ O that his left hand were under my head,
And that his right hand embraced me!" (2:4-6).

The advice of the sage to this woman of imagination seems to appear in the following verse:

- "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
By the gazelles or the wild does:
Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!" (2:7).
The woman wishes to spend her time with her lover:
- ² Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine,
- ³ Your anointing oils are fragrant,
Your name is perfume poured out;

Therefore the maidens love you.

- ⁴ Draw me after you, let us make haste..." (1:2-7).

If this man were her brother, she wishes, she could go with him whenever she wished. These verses should be read in the context of the social setting of the eastern society where man and woman were not expected to go alone except with the members of the same family:

- "O that you were like a brother to me,
Who nursed at my mother's breast!
If I met you outside, I would kiss you,
And no one would despise me" (8:1).

After presenting this thought of the woman, the sage gives the following advice to her:

- "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!" (8:4).

The woman often spend her time in dreams in which she would be with her lover:

- ⁸ The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes,
Leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.
- ⁹ My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.
Look, there he stands behind our wall,
Gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.
- ¹⁰ My beloved speaks and says to me:
"Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away..." (2:8-10).
- ⁴ My beloved thrust his hand into the opening,
And my inmost being yearned for him.
- ⁵ I arose to open to my beloved,
And my hands dripped with myrrh,
My fingers with liquid myrrh,
Upon the handles of the bolt.
- ⁶ I opened to my beloved,
But my beloved had turned and was gone.
My soul failed me when he spoke.
I sought him, but did not find him;
I called him, but he gave no answer" (5:4-6).

- "¹¹ I went down to the nut orchard,
To look at the blossoms of the valley,
To see whether the vines had budded,
Whether the pomegranates were in bloom.
- ¹² Before I was aware, my fancy set me
In a chariot beside my prince" (6:11-12).
"Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle
or a young stag upon the mountains of spices!" (8:14).
She is often in despair because she is unable to meet him:
- "⁶ I opened to my beloved,
But my beloved had turned and was gone.
My soul failed me when he spoke.
I sought him, but did not find him;
I called him, but he gave no answer.
- ⁷ Making their rounds in the city the sentinels found me;
They beat me, they wounded me,
They took away my mantle, those sentinels of the walls
- ⁸ I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
if you find my beloved, tell him this:
I am faint with love" (5:6-8).
- "¹ Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves;
I sought him, but found him not;
I called him, but he gave no answer.
- ² "I will rise now and go about the city,
in the streets and in the squares;
I will seek him whom my soul loves."
I sought him, but found him not.
- ³ The sentinels found me, as they went about in the city.
"Have you seen him whom my soul loves?"
- ⁴ Scarcely had I passed them,
When I found him whom my soul loves.
I held him, and would not let him go
Until I brought him into my mother's house,
And into the chamber of her that conceived me" (3:1-4).

After presenting these dreams of the woman, the advice to her is immediately given which is already given before:

"I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
By the gazelles or the wild does:
Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!" (3:5).

The woman thinks that her lover is her own and she belongs to him alone (2:16; 6:3; 7:10). This compelled her to go in search of him at night, but then she was wounded by the sentinels of the city (5:7). People around her then ask her the following question:

"What is your beloved more than another beloved
O fairest among women?
What is your beloved more than another beloved
That you thus adjure us?" (5:9).

Once the doors of love are let open, the woman would often be persuaded to organize her life according to the empty words of her lover:

- "⁴ You are beautiful as Tirzah, my love,
Comely as Jerusalem, terrible as an army with banners.
- ⁵ Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me!
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
Moving down the slopes of Gilead.
- ⁶ Your teeth are like a flock of ewes,
That have come up from the washing;
All of them bear twins,
And not one among them is bereaved.
- ⁷ Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
Behind your veil.
- ⁸ There are sixty queens and eighty concubines,
And maidens without number.
- ⁹ My dove, my perfect one, is the only one,
The darling of her mother, flawless to her that bore her.
The maidens saw her and called her happy;
The queens and concubines also, and they praised her.
- ¹⁰ "Who is this that looks forth like the dawn,
Fair as the moon, bright as the sun,
Terrible as an army with banners?" (6:4-10).

Hearing or imagining these tempting words of her lover, the woman would foolishly enter into the world of her dreams. The woman would

then have a dilemma about which way to follow: the socially accepted way or the path of her emotions. The advice of the sage to this woman and her neighbors is seen in the following verse:

"Return, return, O Shulammitte! Return, return,
That we may look upon you.
Why should you look upon the Shulammitte,
As upon a dance before two armies?" (6:13).

The words that often appear in the book as that of the lover are either the empty or tempting words of a young man or simply the imagination of the woman. For example:

"Ah, you are beautiful, my love; ah, you are beautiful;
Your eyes are doves" (1:15; cf. also 1:9-11; 4:1-15).

Now the sage exhorts the woman to be aware of these empty words and temptations. One of the examples these empty words could be found in the following lines:

¹⁰ My beloved speaks and says to me:

"Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;

¹¹ For now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

¹² The flowers appear on the earth;
The time of singing has come,
And the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

¹³ The fig tree puts forth its figs,
And the vines are in blossom;
They give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

¹⁴ O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
In the covert of the cliff, let me see your face,
Let me hear your voice;

For your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely" (2:10-14).

The sage now also asks the community to try to protect these people from the tempters who are labeled as little foxes:

"Catch us the foxes, the little foxes,
That ruin the vineyards -

For our vineyards are in blossom" (2:15)

In order to find real love, women should wait patiently until the time of their marriage, and the society should preserve an apt setting for such a life arresting the destroyers.

After having exhorted the women not to stir up or awaken love before the socially conceived time, the sage gives three important insights in relation to love and sex:

1. "Love is strong as death" (8:6). If one stirs it up, he will lose the control over it.
2. "Jealousy is cruel as the grave" (8:6). The jealousy that emerges from love affairs is often cruel as grave. It will lead one into serious trouble: "Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame" (8:6).
3. "Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If one offers for love all the wealth of his house,
It would be utterly scorned" (8:7).

Just as love is a very strong emotion and real as death, it is also true that one cannot buy it for money. In order to enjoy love one has to wait patiently until the socially fixed time. If one loses the possibility for this, even if she is ready to spend all her wealth for this, she would not succeed in finding this again.

In the book what appears after this great exhortation is the anxiety of the brothers of the young woman:

⁸ We have a little sister, and she has no breasts.

What shall we do for our sister,
On the day when she is spoken for?

⁹ If she is a wall,
We will build upon her a battlement of silver;
But if she is a door,
We will enclose her with boards of cedar" (8:8-9).

When the time of marriage arrives, what her brothers are going to do appears to be conceived here. If the girl is a wall, i.e., if she has set a wall around her and kept her virginity, they would be happy and will adorn her by building a tower.⁷⁶ If she is a door, i.e., if she had allowed everyone to enter there, they would enclose her with boards of cedar. She would then be in trouble.⁷⁷ These are things experienced by women in the ancient society especially in the orient. What should be the thoughts of a model woman is also set at the end:

"I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers;
Then I was in his eyes as one who brings peace" (8:10).

Only those women who make a wall around them and wait until the time of their marriage will find true love and peace before their husbands. This teaching was very vital in the ancient society, just as it is in many oriental societies today (cf. Deut 22:14-21).

It was then necessary that the sages give this great instruction on life. Being an important faculty and experience of man, love and sex are always significant in human life. The wise handling of this gift would lead one to success and happiness; whereas the foolish handling of this would destroy one's life. The Song of Songs which imparts such a great teaching on individual life is in fact an essential part of wisdom tradition and its presence necessary among the wisdom books for comprehensiveness. Notably, in the rest of the Bible, marriage is generally viewed only from the social point of view as a union of families, properties, and as a way to have descendants.

End Notes

- ⁶⁴ In history, there was unity among the Jewish and Christian exegetes to interpret Songs allegorically: Jews interpreted it as an expression of love between God and Israel; the Christians on their part saw it as an expression of love between Jesus and the Church (or individuals); however, since 17th century, modern scholars are almost unanimous to see Songs as an expression of human love; cf. the brief exposition in R.E. Murphy, "Book of Song of Songs," ABD VI, 154-155; see also C.D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, Edinburgh, 1857:20-60; R. Lawson, *Origen. The Song of Songs. Commentary and Homilies*, Westminster, ACW 26, 1957.
- ⁶⁵ Cf. J. Angénieux, "Structure du Cantique des Cantiques," *ETL* 41 (1964), 96-112; L. Krinetzki, *Das Hohe Lied*, Düsseldorf, 1964; F. Landsberger, "Poetic Units Within the Song of Songs," *JBL* 73(1954), 203-216; A. Miller, *Das Hohe Lied*, Bonn, 1927.
- ⁶⁶ Cf. K.L. Sparks, "The Song of Songs: Wisdom for Young Jewish Women," *CBQ* 70 (2008) 277-299.
- ⁶⁷ Cf. K.L. Sparks, "The Song of Songs," 281-284, 291; R.J. Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1998, 157-165; T. Longman, *Song of Songs*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, NICOT, 2001, 48-49; J.G. Snaith, *The Song of Songs*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, NCB, 1993, 6-7; R.E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, Menneapolis, Hermeneia, 1990, 97-99.
- ⁶⁸ Cf. K.L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature*, Peabody, Hendrickson, 2005, 126-143; R.E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 41-57.

- ⁶⁹ Cf. R.E. Murphy, "Book of Song of Songs," 151-152.
- ⁷⁰ These songs were often used in secular venues (cf. *t. Sanh.* 12.10; *b. Sanh.* 101a), while Rabbi Aqiva had defended the Songs as scripture (cf. *m. Yad.* 3.5; cf. *b. Sanh.* 101a).
- ⁷¹ Cf. L. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*, 485-486.
- ⁷² Recently, scholars have recognized Songs as wisdom literature; cf. B.S. Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament as Scripture*, Philadelphia, 1979, 573-575; E. Würthwein, "Das Hohelied" in *Die fünf Megilloth*, 2nd ed. Tübingen, HAT 18, 1969, 31; R.E. Murphy, "Wisdom in the Old Testament," 928.
- ⁷³ Cf. J.L. Crenshaw, "Proverbs," *ABD* V, 515.
- ⁷⁴ Cf. Y. Sefati, *Love Songs in Sumerian Literature: Critical Edition of the Dumuzi-Inanna Songs*, Ramat Gan, Bar-Ilan University, 1998, 187; M.V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, Madison, University of Wisconsin, 1985, 46-47, 54-55; see the discussion in K.L. Sparks, "The Song of Songs," 280-281.
- ⁷⁵ Cf. K.L. Sparks, "The Song of Songs," 294; A. Brenner, "Women Poets and Authors," in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1993, 89.
- ⁷⁶ Scholars have already noted the importance of protecting the virginity of woman before their marriage and its necessity in the social life of the Ancient Near East; cf. J.S. Cooper, "Virginity in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East*, ed. S. Parpola and R.M. Whiting, Helsinki, RAI 47, Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002, 91-112; T. Frymer-Kensky, "Virginity in the Bible," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. V.H. Matthews et al. Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, JSOTSup 262, 1998, 79-96; V.H. Matthews and D.C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE*, Peabody, Hendrickson, 1993, 176-186.
- ⁷⁷ Cf. K.L. Sparks, "The Song of Songs," 288-290.

mind poured forth wisdom." The book is therefore known as the Wisdom of Ben Sirach; in short it is called Sirach.

The book should have been written in Hebrew between 196-175 B.C. Today we have only the Greek translation of the book which was probably done in 132 B.C. In the foreword to the translation of the book, the grandson of the author states that he arrived in Egypt in the 38th year of the reign of King Euergetes, and that he spent many days and sleepless nights of hard work in preparing his Greek translation for publication. The epithet "Euergetes," ('benefactor') was given to only two Lagid kings: Ptolemy III Euergetes I (246-221 B.C.) and Ptolemy VII Physkon Euergetes II (170-164 and 146-117 B.C.). Since the former reigned only 25 years, the latter must be the Euergetes in question. He began his rule in 170 together with his brother Ptolemy VI (181-146), and died fifty-three years later in 117. Calculating from 170, Ptolemy VII's official accession year, the 38th year (when the grandson migrated to Egypt) would be 132 B.C.⁷⁹ The young man who translated the book must have reached in Egypt in 132 B.C. and he must have begun the translation of it without much delay. This also means that Sirach was written after Job and Ecclesiastes and those theologies probably had their influence on the society. Sirach also refers to Simon the High Priest in 51:1-21 (i.e., Simon II, high priest in the period 219-196 B.C.) whom the author might have seen; however, he does not mention about the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.) which means that the book should be written between 196-175 B.C.

The Jews of the first century still considered it as part of the inspired scripture. The rabbis then used to quote from this book. The book was translated into several languages in the first century which shows the respect that the book received from the Jews in Palestine. Jews at Masada had a Hebrew copy of Ben Sirach which was written stichometrically, which was a method reserved for copying only the scriptures.⁸⁰ It was also translated into Greek in the second part of the second century itself; the presence of the book in LXX, the Bible of the Diaspora, shows that Jews considered it as part of sacred writings.

The book won great reverence and publicity in the early church. Early Christians loved to read from this book because it exalted all the general moral principles. The Latin name *Ecclesiasticus* [Liber]

Chapter 7

Wisdom of Ben Sirach

Sirach (Wisdom of Ben Sirach/Sirach/ Ecclesiasticus) is the longest wisdom book in the Bible having 51 chapters. The book contains not only short sayings like the Book of Proverbs but also long discussions on wisdom. This is a book modeled on the Book of Proverbs with the difference that Proverbs originated from a compilation of materials by different authors spanning several centuries, and the sayings in the book are not arranged according to any order, whereas Ben Sirach is the work of a single Jewish author of the early 2d century B.C.; he also tried to arrange the sayings thematically.

The book contains moral, cultic, and ethical maxims, folk proverbs, psalms of praise and lament, theological and philosophical reflections, homiletic exhortations, and pointed observations about life and customs of the day.⁷⁸ Unlike most of the biblical books, this book gives the name of its author in chapter 50:27: "Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book, Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem, whose

'Church Book' should have originated from the popularity of the book among the Christians. By the end of the first century A.D. the Pharisees rejected the book by saying that although it was written in Hebrew it did not exist during time of Ezra. The real reason might be the popularity that the book got among the Christians or the similarity of its teachings to that of the Sadducees. The Church Councils of Hippo (393 A.D) and Carthage (397, 419 A.D.) accepted the book (that was part of LXX) as canonical. The Jews of today do not consider Sirach as inspired. Since the Protestants basically accepted the Jewish scriptures, they do not consider Sirach as canonical.

Sirach was a scribe and therefore he was a man of knowledge. After having read the Law, Prophets, and writings of the fathers with attention, he had written this book with the intention of instructing other people who do not know the Law and Prophets: "Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom. Now, those who read the scriptures must not only themselves understand them, but must also as lovers of learning be able through the spoken and written word to help the outsiders. So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law" (Prologue of Sirach). Wisdom writings would be read by all people without any distinction of national or religious boundaries. Accordingly, one could even say that Sirach has employed wisdom tradition as a means to communicate moral and religious message to other nations.

The vision on life of Sirach is elucidated in Sir 39:1-5:

"... he who devotes himself to the study

Of the law of the Most High

Will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients,

And will be concerned with prophecies;

² He will preserve the discourse of notable men

And penetrate the subtleties of parables;

³ He will seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs

And be at home with the obscurities of parables.

⁴ He will serve among great men and appear before rulers;

He will travel through the lands of foreign nations,
For he tests the good and the evil among men.

⁵ He will set his heart to rise early to seek the Lord

Who made him,

And will make supplication before the Most High;

He will open his mouth in prayer

And make supplication for his sins" (Sir 39:1-5)

A wise should learn all the wisdom of the ancients. He should be concerned with the prophecies and value the sayings of the famous persons; he should know the subtleties of the parables and meanings of proverbs; he should have knowledge about foreign lands and peoples; he should be a man of prayer who seeks his God.

From the book one can conclude that Sirach was a man of prayer who lived in Jerusalem (cf. 50:27), but made several journeys to distant lands (34:12-13; 8:15-16); on his way he analyzed all his experiences in the light of his wisdom, the Law, and the Prophets. He then wrote all this knowledge for the benefit of other people.

In order to have a clear understanding of the Book of Sirach, it is good to have a little knowledge about the socio-political situation in Jerusalem of the time of Sirach. In 539 B.C. Persians conquered Babylon and liberated the Jewish exiles from there. Palestine was thereafter under the control of the Persians till 332 B.C. In that year, Alexander the Great defeated the Persians and Palestine came under the rule of the Greeks. In 323 when Alexander died, his great kingdom was divided into four and these four kingdoms were given to Alexander's four generals. Now one of the four, Ptolemy, got Egypt in the southern part of Palestine, while Seleucus got Syria in the north of Palestine. Afterwards, these two kingdoms often fought against one another for the control of Palestine. In 301 B.C. Ptolemy I, brought Palestine under his control that then lasted for a hundred years. Ptolemies had followed the policy of the Persians and thus the local populations were given a certain amount of freedom with regard to their internal affairs. Accordingly the high priest of the Jews was not only the spiritual leader but also an imperial princess. He was also entrusted with the duty of collecting taxes for the Egyptians. As the result of this arrangement, the Jews could enjoy some of the privileges granted by the emperor, and attain economic growth by means of trade with the Egyptians. It was thus a peaceful period.

In the war of Panion (Caesarea Philippi) of 199-198 the Syrian King Antiochus III (223-187) defeated the Egyptians then ruled by Ptolemy IV (203-181); subsequently, Palestine was brought under the control of the Syrians. According to Josephus, Jewish leadership of this time helped the Syrians against the Egyptians (*Ant* 12, 3, 3). As a gesture of gratitude, the Syrian emperor granted the necessary wood for the repair of the temple in Jerusalem. He also reduced some other taxes previously charged from the Jews (cf. *Sir* 50:1-4). Antiochus then declared war against Rome and was subsequently defeated first in the battle of Thermopylae in 192 B.C. and finally in the battle of Magnesia in 190 B.C.; in order to pay the imposed tribute to Rome, he then tried plunder his own temple of Bel; in this attempt, he was assassinated; his successor Seleucus IV was also killed; then his younger brother Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.) came to power. It was he who tried his best to bring the Jews under the power of Hellenistic culture. Sirach must have written his book around 180 B.C. before the ascension of Antiochus IV Epiphanes the throne.

Alexander had a great dream of creating a unified world. He wished to have a single world with one unique culture, one language for all, and a society of equals. The yearning behind the military activities of Alexander was this great dream. His generals had personalized this splendid idea and after the death of Alexander they tried to implement this notion in their kingdoms: they taught their language and culture in their kingdoms. Many of the Jews were attracted to this idea. Being a constant traveler, Sirach saw the imminent danger of assimilation. He saw that many Jews were no more attracted by the traditional ideas. His book therefore was a reaction to this attitude of the Jewish society. Even then he did not try to play down the greatness of the Hellenistic culture; rather he tried to exalt the greatness of the Jewish culture above the Hellenistic. He taught the Jews that real wisdom was not in the Greek capital of Athens but in Jerusalem; the books of revelation of the Jews, he said, were much greater than the philosophical works of the Greeks:

- ¹ Wisdom praises herself,
And tells of her glory in the midst of her people.
- ² In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth,
And in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory:
- ³ "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,
And covered the earth like a mist.

- ⁴ I dwelt in the highest heavens,
And my throne was in a pillar of cloud.
- ⁵ Alone I compassed the vault of heaven
And traversed the depths of the abyss.
- ⁶ Over waves of the sea, over all the earth,
And over every people and nation I have held sway.
- ⁷ Among all these I sought a resting place;
In whose territory should I abide?
- ⁸ "Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,
And my Creator chose the place for my tent.
He said, 'Make your dwelling in Jacob,
And in Israel receive your inheritance' (24:1-8).
The centre of wisdom according to Sirach is Jerusalem.

Structure of the Book

The Book might be divided into five parts:

- A. The prologue of the grandson.
- B. 1:1-23:28 A reflection on Wisdom that comes from God.
- C. 24:1-43:33 A discussion on wisdom in which wisdom is identified with Torah.
- D. 44:1-50:24 A reflection on the patriarchs who were guided by wisdom.
- E. 50:25-51:30 Conclusion and appendix.

The Law, Prophets and Writings in Sirach

One finds the first mention in the Bible of the traditional threefold division of the Holy Scriptures into the Law, Prophets, and writings in the prologue of Sirach. Deviating from the general trend of among the wisdom sages that was prevalent till that time, the Law and Prophets were objects of Sirach's reflections. As evident from the prologue of the book, Sirach tried to interpret the Law, Prophets and writings of the fathers for the Hellenized community. Through this interpretation he communicated his visions and views. For example he interpreted the Deuteronomic Law "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (6:5) in the following way linking it with administrators of divine cult:

29 "With all your soul fear the Lord,
And revere his priests.

30 With all your might love your Maker,
And do not neglect his ministers" (Sir 7:29-30).

Exodus 20:12 teaches one to respect his parents: "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (cf. also Deut 5:16); the basis for the whole teaching in Sirach chapter 3 is this law:

- 1 "Listen to me your father, O children;
Act accordingly, that you may be kept in safety.
- 2 For the Lord honors a father above his children,
And he confirms a mother's right over her children.
- 3 Those who honor their father atone for sins" (Sir 3:1-16).

Love of God, according to Deuteronomy, consists in the obedience to the law of God (Deut 10:12-13; 30:16). The same idea is taught in Sirach:

- ¹⁵ Those who fear the Lord do not disobey his words,
And those who love him keep his ways.
- ¹⁶ Those who fear the Lord seek to please him,
And those who love him are filled with his law" (2:15-16).
Compare also Deut 24:17-22 and Sir 4:8-10.

Sirach either quotes from or points to the books of Pentateuch, Joshua, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Nehemiah, and makes allusions to the Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, and Malachi. Sirach 49:10 remembers the 12 minor prophets; 47:6-11 praises David and holds the traditional view that Psalms were written by him, and Sir 47:14-17 holds the tradition that Proverbs were written by Solomon.

Although the Law and the Prophets were the objects of reflections of Sirach, his basic mode of thinking was that of the wisdom sages. Among the wisdom books, Proverbs was the most important one that seems to have influenced Sirach. For example the personified wisdom says the following in Proverbs:

"The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
The first of his acts of long ago" (8:22).

Sirach presents the same idea in the following way:

"Wisdom was created before all things,

And prudent understanding from eternity" (1:4).

According to Proverbs

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;

Fools despise wisdom and instruction" (1:7; and 9:10; 31:30).

The same teaching is repeatedly given by Sirach. From his wide experience he recognized fear of God as true wisdom. Man can acquire wisdom only if he has fear of God:

"The whole of wisdom is fear of the Lord,
And in all wisdom there is the fulfillment of the law" (19:20).
This notion is visible in the beginning of the book itself:

- 1 All wisdom is from the Lord,
And with him it remains forever.
- 2 The sand of the sea, the drops of rain,
And the days of eternity -
Who can count them?" (1:1-2);
"To fear the Lord is the root of wisdom,
And her branches are long life" (1:18).

He calls fear of God as the beginning of wisdom (1:14), as the fullness of wisdom (1:16), as the crown of wisdom (1:18), and as the root of wisdom (1:20):

- ¹² To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
She is created with the faithful in the womb.
- ¹³ She made among men an eternal foundation,
And among their descendants she will be trusted" (1:12-13).

Only after this basic teaching, that Sirach unfolds his treasure of knowledge before the readers. Man is inefficient to attain wisdom without the help of God, because wisdom is a gift of God. God gives this gift to those who love him (1:10) and those who obey his commandments. So Sirach has the following to say:

"If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments,
And the Lord will lavish her upon you" (1:26).

- ²⁷ "Those who survive her will recognize
That nothing is better than the fear of the Lord,
And nothing sweeter than to heed
The commandments of the Lord" (23:27).

- ¹⁰ "How great is the one who finds wisdom!
But none is superior to the one who fears the Lord.
¹¹ Fear of the Lord surpasses everything;
To whom can we compare the one who has it?" (25:10-11).

Like Proverbs, Sirach taught that for success in life man has to acquire wisdom:

- ¹⁸ "My child, from your youth choose discipline,
And when you have gray hair you will still find wisdom.
¹⁹ Come to her like one who plows and sows,
And wait for her good harvest.
For when you cultivate her you will toil but little,
And soon you will eat of her produce.
²⁰ She seems very harsh to the undisciplined;
Fools cannot remain with her.
²¹ She will be like a heavy stone to test them,
And they will not delay in casting her aside.
²² For wisdom is like her name;
She is not readily perceived by many.
²³ Listen, my child, and accept my judgment;
Do not reject my counsel.
²⁴ Put your feet into her fetters,
And your neck into her collar.
²⁵ Bend your shoulders and carry her,
And do not fret under her bonds.
²⁶ Come to her with all your soul,
And keep her ways with all your might.
²⁷ Search out and seek, and she will become known to you;
And when you get hold of her, do not let her go.
²⁸ For at last you will find the rest she gives,
And she will be changed into joy for you.
²⁹ Then her fetters will become for you a strong defense,
And her collar a glorious robe.
³⁰ Her yoke is a golden ornament,
And her bonds a purple cord.
³¹ You will wear her like a glorious robe,
And put her on like a splendid crown.

- ³² If you are willing, my child, you can be disciplined,
And if you apply yourself you will become clever.
³³ If you love to listen you will gain knowledge,
And if you pay attention you will become wise.
³⁴ Stand in the company of the elders.
Who is wise?
Attach yourself to such a one.
³⁵ Be ready to listen to every godly discourse,
And let no wise proverbs escape you.
³⁶ If you see an intelligent person,
Rise early to visit him;
Let your foot wear out his doorstep.
³⁷ Reflect on the statutes of the Lord,
And meditate at all times on his commandments.
It is he who will give insight to your mind,
And your desire for wisdom will be granted" (6:18-37).
²⁷ "See with your own eyes that I have labored but little
And found for myself much serenity.
²⁸ Hear but a little of my instruction,
And through me you will acquire silver and gold" (51:27-28).
In Proverbs wisdom teaches that
¹⁷ "I love those who love me,
And those who seek me diligently find me.
¹⁸ Riches and honor are with me,
Enduring wealth and prosperity.
¹⁹ My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold,
And my yield than choice silver" (8:17-19).
Now Sirach says the following:
¹⁶ "The fear of the Lord is the crown of wisdom,
Making peace and perfect health to flourish.
¹⁷ He saw her and apportioned her;
He rained down knowledge and discerning comprehension,
And he exalted the glory of those who held her fast"
(1:16-17, RSV).
Similarly says Proverbs,
"The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold,
But the Lord tests the heart" (17:3),

While Sirach says
 "For gold is tested in the fire,
 And those found acceptable,
 in the furnace of humiliation" (2:5).
 Both books teach that
 "Health and fitness are better than any gold,
 And a robust body than countless riches"
 (Sir 30:15-31; Prov 42:15-43:33).

Sirach also makes reflections on Job; amidst his severe sufferings
 Job would recall his previous life of glory and would say:

- ²¹ "They listened to me, and waited,
 And kept silence for my counsel.
 - ²² After I spoke they did not speak again,
 And my word dropped upon them like dew.
 - ²³ They waited for me as for the rain;
 They opened their mouths as for the spring rain.
 - ²⁴ I smiled on them when they had no confidence;
 And the light of my countenance they did not extinguish.
 - ²⁵ I chose their way, and sat as chief,
 And I lived like a king among his troops,
 Like one who comforts mourners" (Job 29:21-25).
- Sirach would present this as the experience of humanity:
 "The rich person speaks and all are silent;
 They extol to the clouds what he says.
 The poor person speaks and they say,
 'Who is this fellow?' And should he stumble,
 They even push him down" (13:23).

One could even say that the idea of Sirach about the glory of God
 and the nothingness of man found in Sirach should be coming from
 Job (cf. Job 18:1-7).

In Sirach we also find references and allusions to Psalms: the
 thoughts of Sirach however are theologically developed and profound.
 For example, the psalmist would say the following:

"...wine to gladden the human heart,
 Oil to make the face shine,
 And bread to strengthen the human heart" (Ps 104:15),

While Sirach would also add that the happiness in connection with
 wine will depend on the manner of its use:

"Wine is very life to human beings if taken in moderation.
 What is life to one who is without wine?
 It has been created to make people happy"
 (31:27; cf. 31:12-31).

One can see two laments in Sirach that are similar to psalms:

- I. ¹ O Lord, Father and Master of my life,
 Do not abandon me to their designs,
 And do not let me fall because of them!
- ² Who will set whips over my thoughts,
 And the discipline of wisdom over my mind,
 So as not to spare me in my errors,
 And not overlook my sins?
- ³ Otherwise my mistakes may be multiplied,
 And my sins may abound,
 And I may fall before my adversaries,
 And my enemy may rejoice over me.
- ⁴ O Lord, Father and God of my life,
 Do not give me haughty eyes,
⁵ And remove evil desire from me.
- ⁶ Let neither gluttony nor lust overcome me,
 And do not give me over to shameless passion" (Sir 23:1-6).
- II. ¹ Have mercy upon us, O God of all,
² And put all the nations in fear of you.
³ Lift up your hand against foreign nations
 And let them see your might.
- ⁴ As you have used us to show your holiness to them,
 So use them to show your glory to us.
- ⁵ Then they will know, as we have known
 That there is no God but you, O Lord.
- ⁶ Give new signs, and work other wonders;
- ⁷ Make your hand and right arm glorious.
- ⁸ Rouse your anger and pour out your wrath;
- ⁹ Destroy the adversary and wipe out the enemy.

- ¹⁰ Hasten the day, and remember the appointed time,
And let people recount your mighty deeds.
- ¹¹ Let survivors be consumed in the fiery wrath,
And may those who harm your people meet destruction.
- ¹² Crush the heads of hostile rulers who say,
"There is no one but ourselves."
- ¹³ Gather all the tribes of Jacob,
- ¹⁴⁻¹⁶ And give them their inheritance, as at the beginning.
- ¹⁷ Have mercy, O Lord, on the people called by your name,
On Israel, whom you have named your firstborn,
- ¹⁸ Have pity on the city of your sanctuary,
Jerusalem, the place of your dwelling
- ¹⁹ Fill Zion with your majesty,
And your temple with your glory.
- ²⁰ Bear witness to those whom you created in the beginning,
And fulfill the prophecies spoken in your name.
- ²¹ Reward those who wait for you
And let your prophets be found trustworthy.
- ²² Hear, O Lord, the prayer of your servants,
According to your goodwill toward your people,
And all who are on the earth will know
That you are the Lord, the God of the ages" (36:1-22).
- Similarly, like the hymns of praise (psalms), there are several hymns of praise in Sirach. See for example the following hymns:
- ¹⁵ "I will now call to mind the works of the Lord,
And will declare what I have seen.
By the word of the Lord his works are made;
And all his creatures do his will.
- ¹⁶ The sun looks down on everything with its light,
And the work of the Lord is full of his glory.
- ¹⁷ The Lord has not empowered even his holy ones
To recount all his marvelous works,
Which the Lord the Almighty has established
So that the universe may stand firm in his glory..."
(42:15-43:33)
- ²² "And now bless the God of all,
Who everywhere works great wonders,

- Who fosters our growth from birth,
And deals with us according to his mercy.
- ²³ May he give us gladness of heart,
And may there be peace in our days in Israel,
As in the days of old.
- ²⁴ May he entrust to us his mercy,
And may he deliver us in our days!" (50:22-24).
(See also 1:1-10; 18:1-7; 39:12-35; 42:15-43:33; 51:1-12).

Since the thought of the sages surpass religious, cultural, and national boundaries, and the experience of humankind are always the same everywhere, Sirach tried to personalize not only the wisdom of his ancestors but also the wisdom that he acquired from other nations and peoples as he travelled abroad; he tried to give this wisdom to his Jewish readers. Scholars today think that Sirach had taken several ideas from the Greek culture.⁸¹ They also think that the Egyptian Instructions of Duauf (cf. *ANET*, 432-434) gives basis for Sir 38:24-39:11. Similarly, as we have mentioned in the beginning of this book, Sirach also depends much on Papyrus Insinger.

Although Sirach was very open to all cultures and religions, he did not hold a syncretistic notion of things. All faiths meant not the same for him. His mind was open but remained very faithful to the faith of his ancestors and respected it. By taking elements from other religions, he thought, one would enrich his own religion and culture. Notably, many Jews at the time of Sirach were attracted to Greek culture and were ready to forsake the traditions of their fathers. Sirach told them that Jerusalem was the real centre of wisdom (23:3-8). He saw the Jews as the most esteemed people on earth (24:12) and Jerusalem as the holy city of the only God (24:11).

There were two basic things that persuaded Sirach to exalt Jerusalem: 1) the great impression that the Greek culture and philosophy had created on the Jews and 2) the persecution that the righteous Jews had been suffering from the authorities under foreign rule. These things began to discourage many to hold on to the Jewish way of life. Sirach declared to them that if anyone wants to acquire real wisdom, instead of clinging to the Greek philosophy, he has to obey the law of God (15:1) and be ready to withstand trials against his faith (2:1-10; 4:17-19). If one is ready to cling to his God even amidst his sufferings, God will protect him (2:10-11). One has to strive continuously to acquire wisdom:

"My child, from your youth choose discipline,
And when you have gray hair you will still find wisdom"
(6:18; cf. also 14:20-27).

If one does so, wisdom would embrace him like a mother and like a new bride (15:2). Although wisdom guides people to glory (4:11-16), unfortunately, she is unattainable for many (6:22). One can acquire wisdom only having fear of God and by obeying his commandments; he should also keep himself away from sins:

"If they go astray she will forsake them,
And hand them over to their ruin" (4:19).

As a result fools and sinners will not succeed in attaining wisdom:

7 "The foolish will not obtain her,
And sinners will not see her.

8 She is far from arrogance,
And liars will never think of her" (15:7-8).

Retribution

Sirach basically admits the main teaching of Proverbs, i.e., retribution. For example, note the following verses:

¹¹ Do not envy the success of sinners,
For you do not know what their end will be like.

¹² Do not delight in what pleases the ungodly;
Remember that they will not be held guiltless all their lives"
(9:11-12).

"He makes room for every act of mercy;
Everyone receives in accordance with one's deeds" (16:14).

"Afterward he will rise up and repay them,
And he will bring their recompense on their heads" (17:23).

⁸ If you pursue justice,
You will attain it and wear it like a glorious robe.

9 Birds roost with their own kind,
So honesty comes home to those who practice it" (27:8-9).

²⁶ Whoever digs a pit will fall into it,
And whoever sets a snare will be caught in it.

27 If a person does evil, it will roll back upon him,
And he will not know where it came from" (27:26-27).

The book concludes with a command to do good works that God rewards you in time:

"Do your work in good time,
And in his own time God will give you your reward" (51:30).

The recognition of this principle however is not exclusive or exaggerated. Together with Job and Ecclesiastes Sirach advises to accept the God-given life as it is and to enjoy the happiness given by the creator. Like Job, Sirach thought that certain experiences were beyond human understanding:

¹ "My child, when you come to serve the Lord,
Prepare yourself for testing.

² Set your heart right and be steadfast,
And do not be impetuous in time of calamity.

³ Cling to him and do not depart,
So that your last days may be prosperous.

⁴ Accept whatever befalls you,
And in times of humiliation be patient.

⁵ For gold is tested in the fire,
And those found acceptable,
In the furnace of humiliation" (2:1-5).

"One's enemies are friendly when one prospers,
But in adversity even one's friend disappears" (12:9).

Sirach might be thinking of the friends of Job when he speaks this verse. One should also know that if he wants to be wise he should pass through the experiences of Job:

¹¹ Wisdom teaches her children
And gives help to those who seek her.

¹² Whoever loves her loves life,
And those who seek her from early morning
Are filled with joy.

¹³ Whoever holds her fast inherits glory,
And the Lord blesses the place she enters.

¹⁴ Those who serve her minister to the Holy One;
The Lord loves those who love her.

¹⁵ Those who obey her will judge the nations,
And all who listen to her will live secure.

¹⁶ If they remain faithful, they will inherit her;
Their descendants will also obtain her.

¹⁷ For at first she will walk with them on tortuous paths;

She will bring fear and dread upon them,
 And will torment them by her discipline
 Until she trusts them,
 And she will test them with her ordinances.
 18 Then she will come straight back to them again
 And gladden them,
 And will reveal her secrets to them" (4:11-18).

According to Qoheleth, human life is a gift of God and man can unhesitatingly enjoy the life given to him. The same idea is found in the following words of Sirach:

- ¹⁴ "Do not deprive yourself of a day's enjoyment;
 Do not let your share of desired good pass by you.
¹⁵ Will you not leave the fruit of your labors to another,
 And what you acquired by toil to be divided by lot?
¹⁶ Give, and take, and indulge yourself,
 Because in Hades one cannot look for luxury" (14:14-16).

Qoheleth instructed people to be prudent in making vows before God and if one vows something he should also be ready to fulfill it without delay (Eccl 5:1-7). Sirach also give the same instruction:

- ²² Let nothing hinder you from paying a vow promptly,
 And do not wait until death to be released from it.
²³ Before making a vow, prepare yourself;
 And do not be like a man who tempts the Lord" (Sir 18:22-23).

According to Qoheleth, some people work hard and make a lot of money; however, they will not get the chance to enjoy this wealth (cf. 6:1-2); the same thing will be taught by Sirach in the following way:

- ¹⁸ One becomes rich through diligence and self-denial,
 And the reward allotted to him is this:
¹⁹ When he says, "I have found rest,
 And now I shall feast on my goods!"
 He does not know how long it will be
 Until he leaves them to others and dies" (11:18-19)

When Job and Ecclesiastes asked people to accept the given life as it is, this was the consequence of the thinking that God was transcendent and that he stood above human comprehension. The same notion would be shared by Sirach:

- "Like a tempest that no one can see,
 So most of his works are concealed" (16:21).
¹¹ He who lives forever created the whole universe;
² The Lord alone is just.
³⁻⁴ To none has he given power to proclaim his works;
 And who can search out his mighty deeds?
⁵ Who can measure his majestic power?
 And who can fully recount his mercies?
⁶ It is not possible to diminish or increase them,
 Nor is it possible to fathom the wonders of the Lord.
⁷ When human beings have finished,
 They are just beginning, and when they stop,
 They are still perplexed" (18:1-7).
 " To none has he given power to proclaim his works;
 And who can search out his mighty deeds?" (11:4).

On the one hand Sirach believed that God was just and he would reward each one according to his works; on the other hand, like Job he taught that the reasons for all human sufferings were not comprehensible for man. One may become successful in life even without being righteous; one may suffer evil even if he is righteous. When all these concepts were brought together to a mature level Sirach seems to have come to the following conclusion:

- ²⁶ For it is easy for the Lord on the day of death
 To reward individuals according to their conduct.
²⁷ An hour's misery makes one forget past delights,
 And at the close of one's life one's deeds are revealed" (11:26-27).

Life After Death

Even at the time of Sirach Jews did not begin to believe in Life after death. Sirach thought that after death man would go to the residence of darkness, the underworld:

- ²⁷ Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades
 In place of the living who give thanks?
²⁸ From the dead, as from one who does not exist, Thanksgiving
 has ceased;
 Those who are alive and well sing the Lord's praises" (17:27-28).

One can live after his death only through his sons.

- "¹ He who loves his son will whip him often,
So that he may rejoice at the way he turns out.
² He who disciplines his son will profit by him,
And will boast of him among acquaintances.
³ He who teaches his son will make his enemies envious,
And will glory in him among his friends.
⁴ When the father dies he will not seem to be dead,
For he has left behind him one like himself" (30:1-4).

Sirach also wishes that the righteous judges of Israel live through their children:

"May their bones send forth new life from where they lie,
And may the names of those who have been honored
Live again in their children" (46:12).

Sirach and Monotheism

The sages were seeking the creator-God. This search led them to the notion of one creator of the whole world; if there is only one creator for the whole universe there is only one God. This idea subsequently led them to monotheism. The same God has created, sees, and preserves the whole universe; he lives forever:

- "¹ He who lives forever created the whole universe;
² The Lord alone will be declared righteous" (18:1-3).
¹⁹ The works of all flesh are before him,
And nothing can be hid from his eyes.
²⁰ From everlasting to everlasting he beholds them,
And nothing is marvelous to him" (39:19-20).

Although Sirach was basically a wisdom sage, we have seen that he was also well versed in the teachings of the fathers. At the end of his reflection about the world and its creator, he concluded that the creator-God of the sages and the creator-redeemer-God of the ancestors are one and the same. Here Sirach comes closer to the Deuteronomist's notion of God. That Sirach was a monotheist in the line of Deuteronomy is clear from his comment on the Israelite kings. Like the Deuteronomist's Sirach sees only Josiah and Hezekiah as righteous kings:

- "¹ The name of Josiah is like blended incense
Prepared by the skill of the perfumer;
His memory is as sweet as honey to every mouth,
And like music at a banquet of wine.
² He did what was right by reforming the people,
And removing the wicked abominations.
³ He kept his heart fixed on the Lord;
In lawless times he made godliness prevail.
⁴ Except for David and Hezekiah and Josiah,
All of them were great sinners,
For they abandoned the law of the Most High;
The kings of Judah came to an end" (49:1-4).

This one God should be known by all peoples. That was the desire of Sirach:

- ¹ Have mercy upon us, O God of all,
² And put all the nations in fear of you.
³ Lift up your hand against foreign nations
And let them see your might.
⁴ As you have used us to show your holiness to them,
So use them to show your glory to us.
⁵ Then they will know,
As we have known that there is no God but you, O Lord.
⁶ Give new signs, and work other wonders" (36:1-5).

The true God is eternal (42:21); he created everything through his word (39:18-21; 42:15); he also knows everything that happens in the universe (39:19-20; 42:18-20). The divinely established order in the universe bears testimony to the know-ledge and the glory of this God (43:1-33). God has created all things in the world, and he has marvelously put together all events that happen there (16:26-30). Man can only wonder by looking at this great work:

"How desirable are all his works,
And how sparkling they are to see" (42:22).

The monotheistic notion of Sirach was however different from that of the Deuteronomist, who, at least apparently, advocated herem, i.e., the annihilation of all non-believers and pagans (cf. Deut 31:3; Josh 9:24; Num 21:2). Sirach was searching for the creator-God of

the universe; he thought that the whole humankind was the creation of God and that he shows mercy to all peoples irrespective of religion:

"The compassion of human beings is for their neighbors,
But the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing.
He rebukes and trains and teaches them,
And turns them back, as a shepherd his flock" (18:13).

If there is only one God who gives a law to the universe (wisdom) and if his law is what that brings man to God and works as a medium of communication between God and the world, then the law that God has set in the world (wisdom) and the law that he revealed to his servant (Moses) should be the same (24:23). In both the will of God for humankind is revealed. These are the laws of the same God. As a result Sirach identified Torah with wisdom:

- ¹ Wisdom praises herself,
And tells of her glory in the midst of her people.
² In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth,
And in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory:
³ "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,
And covered the earth like a mist.
⁶ Over waves of the sea, over all the earth,
And over every people and nation I have held sway.
⁷ Among all these I sought a resting place;
In whose territory should I abide?
⁸ "Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,
And my Creator chose the place for my tent.
He said, 'Make your dwelling in Jacob,
And in Israel receive your inheritance.'
¹⁰ In the holy tent I ministered before him,
And so I was established in Zion.
¹¹ Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place,
And in Jerusalem was my domain.
¹⁹ "Come to me, you who desire me,
And eat your fill of my fruits.
²⁰ For the memory of me is sweeter than honey,
And the possession of me sweeter than the honeycomb.
²¹ Those who eat of me will hunger for more,

- And those who drink of me will thirst for more.
²² Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame,
And those who work with me will not sin."
²³ All this is the book of the covenant
Of the Most High God,
The law that Moses commanded us
As an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob" (24:1-24).
The same thought is visible other passages (15:1; 17:11; 19:20;
21:11; 34:8) and when he makes his reflection on Moses:
"He made him hear his voice,
And led him into the thick darkness,
And gave him the commandments face to face,
The law of life and knowledge,
To teach Jacob the covenant,
And Israel his judgments" (45:5).
Sirach consequently give the following advice:
¹² The wise will not hate the law,
But the one who is hypocritical
About it is like a boat in a storm.
³ The sensible person will trust in the law;
For such a one the law is as dependable
As a divine oracle" (33:2-3).

From the identification of Torah with the universal law of the creator who is thought to be the only God (monotheism), certain conclusions will be drawn by Sirach:

1. If the God of Jacob is the creator of the universe (God of sages), and his law gives wisdom, then the temple in which the law of Jacob is set is very important:

- ¹⁸ Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,
And my Creator chose the place for my tent.
¹⁰ In the holy tent I ministered before him,
And so I was established in Zion.
¹¹ Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place,
And in Jerusalem was my domain" (24:8-11).

2. If the Law of Moses gives wisdom, then the sacrifices and blessing prescribed by Torah are also important:

- ⁸ The offering of the righteous enriches the altar,
And its pleasing odor rises before the Most High.
- ⁹ The sacrifice of the righteous is acceptable,
And it will never be forgotten.
- ¹⁰ Be generous when you worship the Lord,
And do not stint the first fruits of your hands.
- ¹¹ With every gift show a cheerful face,
And dedicate your tithe with gladness.
- ¹² Give to the Most High as he has given to you,
And as generously as you can afford.
- ¹³ For the Lord is the one who repays,
And he will repay you sevenfold" (35:8-13).

If the law and sacrifices are essential, the priests who administer these offerings are important as well. Sirach not only makes a meditation on Aaron, the very first priest of Israel (45:6-12), but also gives other reflections on priesthood:

- ²⁹ With all your soul fear the Lord,
And revere his priests.
- ³⁰ With all your might love your Maker,
And do not neglect his ministers.
- ³¹ Fear the Lord and honor the priest,
And give him his portion, as you have been commanded:
The first fruits, the guilt offering,
The gift of the shoulders, the sacrifice of sanctification,
And the first fruits of the holy things" (7:29-31).

Just as Aaron and his son Phinehas, Sirach also respected the Maccabean Priest Simon who was probably his contemporary (cf. 50:1-21).

Sirach did not stop his discussion with a declaration of the importance of offerings and sacrifices, and his invitation to respect the priests. He also spoke about a corresponding inner spiritual attitude that should accompany any sacrifice if it is to be acceptable, because the God of the sage is a righteous God:

- ²¹ If one sacrifices ill-gotten goods,
The offering is blemished;

- ²² The gifts of the lawless are not acceptable.
- ²³ The Most High is not pleased
With the offerings of the ungodly,
Nor for a multitude of sacrifices does he forgive sins" (34:21-23).
"The sacrifice of the righteous is acceptable,
And it will never be forgotten" (35:9).

In fact, for Sirach, obedience to the Law was better than a mechanical way of offering sacrifices; in this way of thinking, Sirach might be coming closer to the Deuteronomic notion of obedience (Deut 11:17; 28:62-63)

- ¹ The one who keeps the law makes many offerings;
² One who heeds the commandments
Makes an offering of well-being.
- ³ The one who returns a kindness offers choice flour,
⁴ And one who gives alms sacrifices a thank offering.
- ⁵ To keep from wickedness is pleasing to the Lord,
And to forsake unrighteousness is an atonement" (35:1-5).

Not only at the time of sacrifices, if one wants to be wise he should be perfect in all his actions. The payers of such a person will surely be heard:

- ²⁵ If a man washes after touching a dead body,
And touches it again, what has he gained by his washing?
- ²⁶ So if a man fasts for his sins,
And goes again and does the same things,
Who will listen to his prayer?
And what has he gained by humbling himself?"
(34:25-26 or 25-29 NRSV).

- ¹⁹ He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan,
Or the widow when she pours out her complaint.
- ¹⁸ Do not the tears of the widow run down her cheek
- ¹⁹ As she cries out against the one who causes them to fall?
- ²⁰ The one whose service is pleasing to the Lord
Will be accepted,
And his prayer will reach to the clouds.

²¹ The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds,
And it will not rest until it reaches its goal;
It will not desist until the Most High responds" (35:19-21).

As already indicated, Sirach was an advocate of social justice. He taught that everyone has to be aware of the poor in the society and practice justice:

"⁸ Give a hearing to the poor,
And return their greeting politely.

⁹ Rescue the oppressed from the oppressor;
And do not be hesitant in giving a verdict.

¹⁰ Be a father to orphans,
And be like a husband to their mother;
You will then be like a son of the Most High,
And he will love you more than does your mother" (4:8-10).

"As water extinguishes a blazing fire,
So almsgiving atones for sin" (3:30).

Summarizing the above said points one can say that Sirach was one who held a high and developed theology. We have already seen that Sirach not only meditates on the Law and the Prophets of his ancestors, but also takes part in the tradition of the sages who were in search of their creator and reflect on the wisdom tradition of the other nations. The openness without being syncretistic makes Sirach truly a wise person. His exhortations are highly theological, comprehensive, inclusive, mature, and based on experience. However, like his predecessors he was also not free from a male oriented social view (cf. Sir 25:13-26).

Sirach is a Pointer to the New Testament Theology

By reflecting on the Law, the Prophets, the other existing writings of the ancestors, and the wisdom of the neighboring nations, Sirach seems to have developed a high theology that comes very close to the New Testament; we can see that the book was widely used by the early church, which in its turn should have influenced the New Testament authors. All the moral teachings of Sirach might be labeled as 'Christian.' For example, see the following verses:

"For the Lord is compassionate and merciful;
He forgives sins and saves in time of distress"

(Sir 2:11; Cf. Jn 8:11).

"Do not babble in the assembly of the elders,
And do not repeat yourself when you pray"

(Sir 7:14; cf. Mt 6:7).

The Jewish belief that Elijah should come before the messiah is held by Sirach:

"At the appointed time, it is written, you are destined
To calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury,
To turn the hearts of parents to their children,
And to restore the tribes of Jacob" (48:10; cf. Luke 1:16-17).

When Sirach prays, he calls God his father:

"¹ O Lord, *Father* and Master of my life,
Do not abandon me to their designs,
And do not let me fall because of them!

² Who will set whips over my thoughts,
And the discipline of wisdom over my mind,
So as not to spare me in my errors,
And not overlook my sins?

³ Otherwise my mistakes may be multiplied,
And my sins may abound,
And I may fall before my adversaries,
And my enemy may rejoice over me.

⁴ O Lord, *Father* and God of my life,
Do not give me haughty eyes,

⁵ and remove evil desire from me.

⁶ Let neither gluttony nor lust overcome me,
And do not give me over to shameless passion" (23:1-6).

Thanking God about his favors, Sirach says the following words:

"¹⁰ I cried out, "Lord, you are *my Father*;
Do not forsake me in the days of trouble,
When there is no help against the proud.

"I will praise your name continually,
And will sing hymns of thanksgiving."
My prayer was heard" (51:10).

In fact, Psalms had visualized God as the father of the anointed king and the Book of Deuteronomy and Prophets visualized God as the father of Israel:

"I will tell of the decree of the Lord:
He said to me, "You are *my son*;
Today I have begotten you" (Ps 3:7; cf. also 2Sam 7:14);
"Do you thus repay the Lord,
O foolish and senseless people?
Is not he your *father*, who created you,
Who made you and established you" (Deut 32:6).

"With weeping they shall come, and with consolations; I will lead them back; I will let them walk by brooks of water; in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a *father* to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn" (Deut 31:9).

"For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us
And Israel does not acknowledge us;
You, O Lord, are *our father*;
Our Redeemer from of old is your name" (Is 63:16).
"Yet, O Lord, you are *our Father*;
We are the clay, and you are our potter;
We are all the work of your hand" (Is 64:8).
"*Have we not all one father?*
Has not one God created us?
Why then are we faithless to one another,
Profaning the covenant of our ancestors?" (Mal 2:10).

Notably the first biblical author who calls God his father is Sirach. Considering God as the father of an individual in fact agrees with the basic vision of the wisdom tradition. The sage is looking for the personal God who intervenes in the personal life of the individual. He is not looking for his national God.

The sage being a seeker of God who intervenes in the personal life of the individual, and not the God of the Law and the Prophets, slowly comes to the recognition of God as his father. This is the point where Sirach comes very close to the New Testament. One of the important teachings of the New Testament is that God is the father and that believers are the children of God in Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 5:43-48; 6:9-13). Even two centuries before the birth of Jesus, Sirach is thinking arrives at this theological level. This theological excellence and the magnitude of exhortations in all possible areas of human life made the book renowned among the Jews of the second century B.C. and was translated into different languages.

End Notes

⁷⁸ Cf. A.A. DiLella, "Wisdom of Ben-Sira," *ABD* VI, 931-932

⁷⁹ Cf. A.A. DiLella, "Wisdom of Ben-Sira," 931-932.

⁸⁰ Cf. A.A. DiLella, "Wisdom of Ben-Sira," 934; Y. Yadin, *The Ben Sira Scroll from Masada*, Jerusalem, 1965, 2-4, 6-8

⁸¹ Cf. A.A. DiLella, "Wisdom of Ben-Sira," *ABD* VI, 933

Chapter 8

Wisdom of Solomon

The Book of Wisdom of Solomon, Book of the Great Wisdom of Solomon (Syriac Peshitta), or Book of Wisdom (Vetus Latina), might be labeled as an exhortatory discourse, which combines philosophy and rhetoric.⁸² It is traditionally believed that the book was written by Solomon. This belief might have come from the text itself in which the author speaks himself as if he is Solomon (6:22-9:18). The prayer for wisdom (Wis 7:7-12; 9:1-12) apparently alludes to the prayer of Solomon in 1 King 3:4-15. The book however is written in Greek and several Hellenistic ideas are found in it;⁸³ consequently, it cannot be considered as written by Solomon. In fact, many concepts in the book are comparable to the ideas found in Philo, an Alexandrian Jewish theologian, who tried to interpret the whole Bible in the light of Greek philosophy. The book also shows ideas found in other Greek writings.

It was written in Greek by a learned and Hellenized Jew in Alexandria probably after the Roman conquest

of Egypt in 30 B.C. The book reflects the socio-political situation of Alexandria. Scholars generally think that the author made use of the LXX version of Isaiah; the address to the rulers of the four corners of the earth (6:1) seems to refer to the period of Roman rule, and the reference to the remoteness of the rulers' dwelling in 14:17 indicates probably the age of Augustus (Roman emperor from 27 B.C. - 14 A.D.), who ruled Egypt personally through a prefect without leaving it under military control. In this period there was also a gradual move to the idolatrous worship of the rulers.⁸⁴ Emperor Augustus began the imperial cult in Rome. The text seems to point to a context in which people made images of emperors who live far away (14:17). For the author who lived in Egypt Rome was really a faraway place. Notably, in the book there are around 35 Greek words that were in use only since first century A.D. This should then be the last book of the Old Testament. Scholars generally think that the Book of Wisdom was written in the last part of the first century B.C.⁸⁵ Even though it might also point to a later period when the Jews underwent severe persecution (cf. Wis 5:16-23) under Emperor Caligula (37-41 A.D.).

We have previously seen that Proverbs of Jewish tradition had already personified wisdom (Prov 8:22-36). It presented wisdom as the very first creature of God (v 22). After her birth, wisdom assisted God in the activity of creation like a master worker (v 30). If one scrutinizes these words of wisdom, it will bring people to confusion. This would imply that there are two persons in God. The Jews of the post exilic period were real monotheists who thought that God alone created the world; for them this text would be confusing. Proverb 8:35 ("For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord") would have made this confusion greater: those who have found wisdom have found God. For the Alexandrian Jews being monotheists and having a philosophical mind, as the result of their Hellenistic formation, thinking of two persons in God, or another being working with God was incomprehensible. If God is one, who is this person (wisdom), who claims to have worked with God? The Book of Wisdom tries to give reasonable answer to this question. In order to understand the thoughts of the book, one must have some idea about the socio-political, and philosophical setting that existed in the Greco-Roman Alexandria.

The Hellenistic Socio-Political Background

In 587 B.C. Babylon conquered Judah and exiled the upper class of the Jewish society into Babylon. Although the poor Jewish people

still lived in Palestine and a governor (Gedaliah) was appointed by the Babylonians confusion sustained and the new governor, who was a pro-Babylonian, was assassinated by a group of rebels (Cf. 2King 25:25-26; Jer 40:1-41:10). This made the situation worst from the worse. Now in order to find a better life, a group of people from Palestine left for Egypt (Jer 42-43). These people, the Diaspora, continued to live there as Israelites even after the liberation of the Babylonian exiles by the Persians, still holding on to their ancestral belief. In 332, Alexander the Great emerged as a great emperor and he conquered the whole Middle East including Egypt. After his death his great kingdom was divided and was ruled by his four generals: Ptolemaic Kingdom in Egypt, Seleucid Empire in the East, Kingdom of Pergamon in Asia, and Macedon. For our discussion only the Ptolemies and Seleucids are relevant.

Alexander had a great dream of creating a single humankind on earth by having one language, one culture, and one faith. The practical way that he found for achieving this goal was political dominion, which could compel all people to learn Greek language and culture. The generals of Alexander were also fond of this great idea and they tried to teach this language and culture to all those who were under their dominion. As a result, at the time of Ptolemy I (323-285 B.C.), Alexandria, the capital of Egypt, became a great centre of Greek culture and philosophy. The famous museum and great library of Alexandria were proofs for this development.

The Jews in Alexandria had eventually become integral part of that society. They learned the Greek language, philosophy, culture, and Hellenistic life style, and lived in the main stream of the society. They also tried to adapt and interpret their faith according to their new culture. The new generation born in Egypt was unable to read their traditional biblical language. For them the Bible was then translated into Greek; thus emerged the Greek translation of the Bible (LXX, translated probably during the time of Ptolemy II - 285-247). This proves that at that time there was a group of Jews in Egypt who could read Greek, but were unable to read Hebrew. Afterwards, the Jewish Philosopher-theologian Philo (20 B.C. - 50 A.D.) tried to interpret all the books in the Bible with the help of Greek philosophy.

From the time of Ptolemy till the beginning of the rule of Roman Emperor Augustus (31 B.C. - 14 A.D.) the Jews in Alexandria used to get certain favors from the rulers. In 24 B.C. however, a poll tax

was introduced by the Roman emperor, who divided the people in Egypt into different groups and thus created inequality in the society. The Greeks were totally exempted from the tax; there were Hellenists who had to pay half of the tax; the local Egyptians had to pay the whole amount. With regard to the Jews, however, no special decision was taken. Jews subsequently tried to get Greek citizenship and they were ready even to sacrifice their faith for this motive. Many Greeks opposed this tendency and slowly it became impossible for the Jews to get exception by means of the new citizenship. This led to a long period of unrest in the society. In 38 A.D. the Jews in Alexandria were attacked by the other people in the same society; they either destroyed their synagogues, or desecrated them by setting the images of the Emperor Caligula inside them. Afterwards the Roman Prefect Avillius Flaccus declared the Jews foreigners in Egypt.

In 39 A.D. the Jewish philosopher-theologian Philo led a delegation to the emperor and tried to convince the emperor about the difficult situation, but nothing favorable happened. In 41 A.D. when Emperor Caligula died, the Jews in Alexandria revolted. The next Emperor Claudius then commanded to maintain the existing situation of the affairs (*status quo*). Even though he passed judgment against the hostile mentality of the Greeks against the Jews, he also declared that Jews did not have the right to have Greek citizenship. Although this judgment created a temporary period of peace, it only helped to confirm the inequality that existed in the society. This led to further revolts and with the revolt of 115-117 A.D. the Jews in Alexandria were eliminated and disappeared from there.⁸⁶

The Book of Wisdom which is written in standard Greek should be read in the context of persecution of the Jewish life even though the situation was not as worse as at the time of Caligula. The cry for social justice (1:1; 2:10-24; 6:1), and the call to stand for justice (3:1-9; 4:7, 16) seem to recall the injustice suffered by the Jews; the book complaints about the idolatrous enemies (14:12-21; 15:13-14; 16:24; 17:1-3). It also hopes that the idolaters would be punished (19:13-15). The author calls the rulers to practice justice, and invites the faithful to live practicing a divinely established Justice (1:1; 2:10; 3:1; 4:7; 5:1; 6:1-7).

Greek Philosophical Background

The Greeks had the best and effective philosophical system on the face of the earth. It molded the mind of Europe and the vast majority

of people on earth. It also became the main system that helped the Catholic Church to form its dogmas. The Greeks had not only the advantage of having the greatest philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, but also had a powerful language that was efficient enough to express these great thoughts. For the Jews who were brought up in the Hellenistic cultural background, many biblical statements about wisdom, as already mentioned above, were incomprehensible and illogical.

God is the creator and preserver of the world. Philosophically speaking there can exist only one almighty God. The notion of two almighty Gods is a philosophical absurdity. This seems to have been the mind of the Alexandrian Jews. Now the question is this: if God is one, who controls everything, then who is the traditionally held wisdom that is said to be working with God (Prov 8:22-30). This point should be clarified based on faith. The Book of Wisdom is making an effort to do this; the author is going to interpret the traditional notion of wisdom with the help of Greek philosophy. In this attempt of the author middle-Platonism, that was prevalent since 80 B.C. till 220 A.D., seems to have helped him the most.

These philosophers (middle-Platonists) sought clarity of notions about all the existing things. They emphasized the primary reality of the immaterial-intelligible realm; subsequently, they tried to define who the real God was. The first definition that they gave to the creator-God was that he was eternal and transcendent. If almighty God is transcendent, then, what about the origin and existence of the visible world? Who preserves it? Who is at work in the visible universe if not God? In order to answer these questions, they made a distinction between two aspects of the divinity: transcendent and immanent. The first aspect of the divinity was essentially transcendent and basically inner-directed; the second aspect was an active, demi-urgic power which was responsible for the creation and ordering of everything else in the universe: it was God in the process of self-communication. The suggested distinction in God was not simply metaphorical, but was meant as a metaphysical explanation which helped them to present not only the transcendence of God, but also the relatively orderly character of the universe. The second aspect of God that was responsible for the preservation and existence of the universe was labeled by these philosophers as 'logos,' (the word of God).⁸⁷

The meaning of the word *logos* is 'word,' which means that according to Greek thought the word (of God) is the creator and preserver of the world. A similar notion was prevalent in Egypt. According to the Egyptians Hu and Sia were personified words of God Re Atum and they were considered as the agents of creation. The Egyptian concept of Ma'at was also similar to this. According to the Egyptians, Ma'at was the personified material and spiritual order in the universe, who was thought to be the daughter of God Re.⁸⁸ That means that in Egypt the cultural context of Alexandria praised the word of God as the agent of creation. In Mesopotamia, Mešaru and Kettu (Righteousness and Right) were sometimes conceived as qualities of the sun-god or sometimes in a more concrete way as personal beings, i.e., independent deities.⁸⁹ In The Words of Ahiqar 94-95 (found at Elephantine) the following is said about wisdom: "For all time the kingdom is hers. In heaven is she established, for the lord of holy ones has exalted her" (cf. ANET, 428)

With regard to the Jews lived in this society, an important change has already been taken place in their thinking pattern. We have already mentioned that for the new generation of the Jews born in Alexandria the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (LXX). In this translation the Greek words *logos* and *rhema* were used to translate the terms word and words. In the prophetic and wisdom books, the term *logos* 'by chance' got prominence (*logos* 320 times and *rhema* 40 times in prophets; *logos* 221 times and *rhema* 40 times in the wisdom writings). After having translated the Bible, when they re-read the Bible in Greek, the word *logos* showed a dynamic character. In Hebrew they signified simply a word but in Greek it became dynamic. For example see the following verses:

"For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Is 2:3).

= Word comes from Jerusalem

"By myself I have sworn,

From my mouth has gone forth in righteousness

A word that shall not return:

"To me every knee shall bow,

Every tongue shall swear" (Is 45:23).

= Word of God goes forth with strength.

"Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice,
Because I have hoped in your word" (Ps 119:74).

= Word of God is redemptive

"He sends forth his command to the earth;
His word runs swiftly" (Ps 147:15).

= Word of God is dynamic

When the Jews in Alexandria read their Bible (Greek) they eventually had the feeling that the referred to word (*logos*) had a dynamic character. One has to remember that for the Greeks *logos* was the dynamic power of God that was at work in the universe.

In addition, in several psalms and in Sirach the word *logos* is used in connection with the creative activity of God. For example see the following verses:

"By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
And all their host by the breath of his mouth" (Ps 33:6).

"Because of him each of his messengers succeeds,
And by his word all things hold together" (Sir 43:26).

This notion was very close to the Egyptian idea of the personified wisdom.

Although in all the above mentioned and similar texts, the term *logos* was simply the Greek translation of the Hebrew term (*dabar*), in the context of the Greek philosophy and Egyptian theological thinking, the Jews in Alexandria began to relate it with the creative and providential nature of God. They eventually began to identify the *logos* in the Bible with the *logos* of middle-Platonism. A mature form of this philosophical thought that was the result of a slow growth can be seen in the Jewish Philosopher-theologian Philo of Alexandria.

Philo interpreted the Greek Bible with the help of Greek philosophy. He interpreted the Law of Moses with the help of middle-Platonism. According to Philo, the word (*logos*) was an intermediary between the transcendent God and the visible world. He called this *logos* the image of God, the most ancient of all the objects of intellect, that is place in closest proximity to the true existing God (*De fuga et inventione*, 101); this was the essence that stood closer to God. *Logos* is not only the image of God, but it was also the model according to which the universe was created. The blueprint of everything in the

world was in the *logos* (*De somniis II*, 45). *Logos* was not only the model according to which the world was created, it was also the instrument of the creation of the world and the energy behind the preservation of the world. Philo also labeled *logos* the first begotten son of the uncreated father (*De confusione linguarum*, 146), the principal angel (*Quis rerum divinarum heres*, 205), and the high priest of the universe (*De fuga et inventione*, 108). *Logos*, he thought, was the intermediary between God and man. The main duty of *logos*, according to Philo, was to work as a mediator between the transcendent God and the tangible world.

The will of man is created in the image of God. Interpreting Gen 1:26-27, Philo said that man was not created in the image of God but he was created according to the image of God. Man is not the image of God; only *logos* is the image of God; man was created according to this image (*logos*). That means that the order of creation is this: God -- Image of God (*logos*) - Man. Man is only a reflection of the image of God (cf. Col 1:15).

Philo's argument continues in the following way. The will of man that is created according to the image of God is not only a reflection of the image of God but also a part of that image: *logos* abides in man. This divine element - *logos* - guides man to God. The ultimate purpose of creation of the human will is that it should know and search for God. If one wants to see God and know God, he should first know the image of God and be in possession of this *logos*. Since *logos* is holy, in order to achieve this goal, man should purify himself and accept his poverty. If one accepts oneself as poor, and sees God as the greatest creator and turns to him, he will be liberated from the earthly bondages and be made capable of meditating the divine *logos*. The divine *logos* will then through meditation guide him to the almighty God.

To state this briefly, Philo thought that God was transcendent and invisible. The world though material and tangible, also comes from the same God. It has a divinely established origin. There should therefore be an efficient mediator between the transcendent God and the material world that links the two entirely different realities. This mediator that is always active in the universe is called *logos*. Through his theory of *logos* Philo, who tried to interpret the biblical notions with the help of middle-Platonism, was trying to explain the transcending and pervading natures of God.

The Book of Wisdom

The book that was probably written in the first century should either be written by Philo, or one of his contemporaries, or any philosopher of the first century. This Jewish philosopher had seen that wisdom was personified in his faith tradition (cf. Prov 8:22-36; Job 28:12-28; Sir 24). Although wisdom was thus personified, a clear notion of this wisdom was yet to be communicated. This was very important in the context of the monotheistic thought of the Jews because a true monotheist could not grasp the relevance of a co-worker of God in the activity of creation. The Book of Wisdom is trying to clarify this point. Revealing the intention of the author, in the central part of the book, the author makes the following comment: "I will tell you what wisdom is and how she came to be, and I will hide no secrets from you, but I will trace her course from the beginning of creation, and make knowledge of her clear, and I will not pass by the truth" (6:22). In the following part he then tries to elucidate who wisdom really is.

The author begins to speak about wisdom by listing 21 characteristics of wisdom. Most of them are Hellenistic philosophical notions: "22 For wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me. There is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, 23 beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle" (7:22-23). Remember that twenty-one is seven multiplied by three, all being perfect numbers.

One can say that the qualities attributed to wisdom are really the qualities of God. All these originate from God; therefore the author continues to say the following: "24 For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. 25 For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her" (7:24-25). Wisdom is the power and glory of God that emanates from him to the world; thus wisdom works as a mediator between God and the world (this was practically the same as the notion of *logos* in middle-Platonism).

Like Philo, the author of the Book of Wisdom sees wisdom as the image of God: "For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror

of the working of God, and an image of his goodness" (7:26). This is the image that makes the invisible God visible. Man can know the invisible God only through wisdom, the reason being that in order to reveal himself the transcended God has to set his image (wisdom) in the world.

In this image of God that pervades the whole world (Prov 24:3) no impurity can enter (7:25). Although she is alone she can do all things; she changes everything without she herself undergoing change (7:27). Wisdom is in fact the dynamic power of God that is active in the world. In other words, it is through wisdom that the transcended and almighty God works in this universe. Wisdom is that element that is at work in the world: "Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets" (7:27).

Man can be a friend of God only if wisdom comes to him (cf. 7:25). Wisdom is not only the power of God that emanates from God, but it is also the divine power that fills the human mind and thus makes them the friends of God. We have already seen that wisdom is the order that exists in the world. This idea is well expressed in the book: "She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well" (8:1). The author of the book in fact gives a philosophical foundation to this idea. Besides, wisdom lives with God: "She glorifies her noble birth by living with God, and the Lord of all loves her" (8:3). God loves wisdom who lives with him and does his work in the world (7:28).

The author of the book thus elucidated the traditional but unclear notion of wisdom. Wisdom is the power that emanates from God and the power that is at work in the created world. She is the image of the invisible God and man can reach the invisible God only through this image of God. If one wants to know the will of God he needs wisdom (9:17). Wisdom is the mediator between the invisible God and the earthly man: "For she is an initiate in the knowledge of God, and an associate in his works" (8:4). In the beginning of this discussion we have seen that the sages were seeking the God who revealed himself to man through his day-to-day experiences. To such seekers of God the author of the book gives the following exhortation: if you want to know the transcended and invisible God, then you should first know the image and power of God (i.e., wisdom) and be filled with that

power, and purify yourself for that. Only when the power of God - order - fills man, then he can see the invisible God.

In order to know God one should have wisdom. In order to have wisdom one should first pray for wisdom: "Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me" (7:7). Since God is the source and giver of wisdom one must pray for this. Since wisdom is holy, to get wisdom man must purify himself (7:27) and be away from sin (12:3-27). With love man should try to acquire wisdom (7:10). Only by having wisdom man will be made capable of knowing the will of God (9:17) and reach God.

Structure of the Book and Its Theology

The book can be divided into three parts: I. 1:1-6:21. In this part the author discusses the issues in relation to justice, death, last judgment, and eternal life. Genesis 1-3 that speaks about the creation of the world and the entry of death into the world are taken for reflection. This part comes to its end by introducing wisdom that helps the rulers to practice justice (6:9-21).

II. 6:22-9:18. In this part wisdom is personified; here the author explains what wisdom is and what man has to do in order to possess wisdom.

III. 10:1-19:22. Here based on Pentateuch the author explains how wisdom guided and influenced human history. Wisdom was the force that was at work in the creation of the world, in the life of the patriarchs, and in the redemption of Israelites from Egypt.

First Part

In this part the main theme of discussion is the clash between justice and injustice. The author calls all his readers to practice justice: God is one and just (6:3; 12:27; 13:1-19; 14:3, 12) and he judges everyone justly; therefore, all should practice justice: "1 Listen therefore, O kings, and understand; learn, O judges of the ends of the earth. 2 Give ear, you that rule over multitudes, and boast of many nations. 3 For your dominion was given you from the Lord, and your sovereignty from the Most High; he will search out your works and inquire into your plans. 4 Because as servants of his kingdom you did not rule rightly, or keep the law, or walk according to the purpose of God, 5 he will come upon you terribly and swiftly, because severe

judgment falls on those in high places. 6 For the lowliest may be pardoned in mercy, but the mighty will be mightily tested. 7 For the Lord of all will not stand in awe of anyone, or show deference to greatness; because he himself made both small and great, and he takes thought for all alike" (6:1-7).

If one wants to do justice, he has to be wise and has to be in possession of the divine wisdom: "8 But a strict inquiry is in store for the mighty. 9 To you then, O monarchs, my words are directed, so that you may learn wisdom and not transgress. 10 For they will be made holy who observe holy things in holiness, and those who have been taught them will find a defense. 11 Therefore set your desire on my words; long for them, and you will be instructed" (6:8-11).

The author addressing his fellow Jews tried to encourage them to take pride in their traditional faith. He wanted to convince them that their way of life, rooted in the worship of the one true God, was incomparably higher than that of their pagan neighbors who through their idolatry would be brought to their own destruction. He also attempted to console them for their present suffering with the promise of immortality as a reward for their righteous life. In the context in which the Egyptians divinized their kings, the author presented these rulers as human and mortal (cf. 7:1-5; 9:5). By presenting the Jewish faith in a philosophically respectable way, he tried to silence the enemies within the religion as well as those outside.⁹⁰

He also tried to support and confirm the faith of those who have suffered injustice under the rule of the Greco-Roman regime: "6 For wisdom is a kindly spirit, but will not free blasphemers from the guilt of their words, because God is witness of their inmost feelings, and a true observer of their hearts and a hearer of their tongues. 7 Because the spirit of the Lord has filled the world, and that which holds all things together knows what is said" (1:6-7); "But the righteous, though they die early, will be at rest" (4:7); "The righteous who have died will condemn the ungodly who are living, and youth that is quickly perfected will condemn the prolonged old age of the unrighteous" (4:16); "But the righteous live forever, and their reward is with the Lord; the Most High takes care of them" (5:15).

It was the reflection on the principle of retribution that led the author to this notion of life after death. He really believed that the righteous man will get his reward; however, this belief was not proved

true in some cases. As a result he thought of the just as getting their reward after their death (3:1). This thought of the sage eventually led him to the conclusion that there will be a just judgment after the death (4:6, 20) and that the righteous will receive eternal life as their reward.

Notably, the belief in life after death had a late origin in Israel. The notion first appears in the Book of Daniel that was written in the second century B.C. (Dan 12:2-3) and in the Second Book of the Maccabees (7:9) of the same century. During the exilic period the notion of the resurrection of the dead was used by authors as a symbol of the restoration of the people back in the land (Ezek 37). These however did not imply the faith in the life after death of the individual. Even in the time of Jesus the faith in after life was not an important article of faith of the Jews: the Pharisees believed that there would be a resurrection of the dead, while the Sadducees denied this (cf. Mt 12:18-27; 22:23-33; Lk 20:27-40; Act 23:6-10).

Since God is just, man has to be just to attain life. God created the beautiful world, but it was the sin of the first man that welcomed death into this world (1:12-13). Death was not a creation of God. God is one and just. Justice consists in knowing this God: "For to know you is complete righteousness, and to know your power is the root of immortality" (15:3; cf. also 12:27; 13:1).

According to the author, justice meant the knowledge of the true God and obedience to his laws. He was a monotheist and could think of the existence of only one God. He seems to have got the notion that obedience to the law of God is righteousness and wisdom from Deuteronomist and Sirach. Like Sirach, Wisdom tries to hold both Law and Prophets and wisdom tradition together. One might ask: why should man obey the laws of the only God? The answer of the sage is the following: man is bound to lead a righteous life because this short life of man on earth is a gift of God. After this life there will be a judgment before God (4:6, 20). God will punish the unjust (3:16) and reward the just with eternal life (3:13; 4:7).

God has created man in his wisdom. God and wisdom are eternal. If this is so, the man in whom wisdom abides is one who is created for eternity: "18 love of her is the keeping of her laws, and giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality, 19 and immortality brings one near to God" (6:18-19); "23 God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, 24 but through the devil's envy

death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it" (2:23-24); "But the righteous live forever, and their reward is with the Lord; the Most High takes care of them" (5:15). To do justice is therefore the best thing that man can do. Wisdom is the force that helps man to practice justice.

The book proclaims not only the principle of retribution held by the Book of Proverbs (1:6-8; 2:18, 22; 3:10, 14; 4:7; 5:15; 6:5; 12:14), but also calls people to enjoy the given life as advocated by Ecclesiastes (2:2-9). At the same time one has to enjoy the providential care of God by practicing justice like Job (3:1-9). The highly developed theology of the Book of Sirach is found also in Wisdom as well; consequently, the author tries to combine together several theological notions. As a result the author makes reflections on the Law (3:14-16), the temple (3:14), the priest (18:20-22), and Solomon.

The first part of the book which introduces and comments on the importance of concludes by introducing wisdom before the rulers of the earth: "9 To you then, O monarchs, my words are directed, so that you may learn wisdom and not transgress. 10 For they will be made holy who observe holy things in holiness, and those who have been taught them will find a defense. 11 Therefore set your desire on my words; long for them, and you will be instructed" (6:9-11).

Second Part

In this part the author makes a discourse on wisdom and he explains the way to acquire wisdom. What the author thinks about wisdom has already been discussed in relation to logos; he has personified wisdom and in doing so he has only continued the tradition found in Proverbs (8:22-26) and Sirach (24:1-22). After having spoken about his intention of discussing what wisdom is (6:22-25), the author presents the personified wisdom (7:22-8:21) in between two prayers that appear to be of Solomon (7:1-21; 9:1-18). More than any other biblical book, the Book of Wisdom speaks about the need of praying for wisdom. If God does not give, he says, no one can acquire wisdom: "But I perceived that I would not possess wisdom unless God gave her to me -- and it was a mark of insight to know whose gift she was -- so I appealed to the Lord and implored him..." (8:21); "13 For who can learn the counsel of God? Or who can discern what the Lord wills? ... 17 Who has learned your counsel, unless you have given

wisdom and sent your holy spirit from on high? 18 And thus the paths of those on earth were set right, and people were taught what pleases you, and were saved by wisdom" (9:13-18).

Third Part

After having said that wisdom is what set the path of those on earth right, the author speaks how wisdom directed the path of the patriarchs; how wisdom worked as a liberator of Israel in Egypt and how she guided Israel in their wilderness journey. After analyzing the first part of the history of humankind, the author says that all those who were redeemed by God were in fact redeemed through wisdom (Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and People of Israel). Those who were destroyed by God were ignorant of God; they were not ready to repent and were idolatrous.

Unlike Ben Sirach, the author does not explicitly identify Torah with wisdom. In his opinion, wisdom is superior to Torah, is the direct bearer of divine revelation, and the supreme arbiter of all values; wisdom functions through the workings of the human mind. She is in fact the archetypal Torah, of which the Mosaic Torah is only an image. Notably, he insists that in order to comprehend the will of God man needs wisdom (9:17). That means that Torah is in need of interpretation which wisdom alone is able to provide. In chapter 10 the author speaks about ten righteous people who were guided by wisdom even before Torah was given on Sinai.⁹¹ Wisdom is greater than Torah.

Another point that comes from the analysis of history of Israel is that God is merciful. God punished the people not because he wished to destroy them but it was to lead them to repentance (12:10, 19, 22, 26). The author repeatedly calls for repentance and invites people to return to God: "²³ But you are merciful to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook people's sins, so that they may repent. ²⁴ For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made, for you would not have made anything if you had hated it" (11:23-24).

Even though the original inhabitants of the Promised Land were idolaters, God showed them mercy: "Judging them little by little you gave them an opportunity to repent, though you were not unaware that their origin was evil and their wickedness inborn, and that their way of thinking would never change" (12:10; cf. also 12:3-8). If one

does not try to learn about this God of mercy, he will be punished: "But those who have not heeded the warning of mild rebukes will experience the deserved judgment of God" (12:26). Through this exhortation, on the one hand the author urges the pagans to practice justice and on the other hand he encourages the Jews to hold on to their faith and thus to overcome the social problems. If one does not give attention to the warning of God, he will be punished.

The most important obstacle that blocks the way to the true knowledge of God is idolatry. It naturally then leads to injustice; therefore the author strongly speaks against idolatry. It was due to the idolatry that Canaanites lost their land (12:3-6) and the Egyptians had to lose before the Israelites (10:20; 12:2-7). After making an introductory statement that all people who are ignorant of God are fools, the author makes a long discussion on the foolishness contained in idolatry. If one looks into the world of created things and meditates on them, he can understand the creator of these things (13:1-9). Those who are unable to do this are the foolish people. They instead of seeking the true God makes idols of their wish, they set them in the place of God, and worship them; then they pray to these dead objects (13:10; 14:11). It is out of their ignorance of the true God that people make idols and worship them. The author speaks the following words to them: "For the idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication, and the invention of them was the corruption of life" (14:12). Man instead of reflecting on the wonderful things in the universe and thus seeking the creator of all these things, made idols of the created things and worshiped them in the place of God.

After having given these general notions about idolatry, the sage speaks about the possible origins of certain forms of idol-worship (14:12-15:18). He sees two reasons for the beginning of a certain idol cult: 1) "A father, consumed with grief at an untimely bereavement, made an image of his child, who had been suddenly taken from him; he now honored as a god what was once a dead human being, and handed on to his dependents secret rites and initiations" (14:15). The father used to respect this image of his departed son; later his successors continued the same cult of respecting the idol even though it had nothing to do with their life; in a later period, says the author, the cults around this idol developed (14:17-21).

Likewise, in order to remind the presence of the far-away em-

peror, the artisan made a statue of him and set it in a common place (14:17); people then began to show respect towards this image. The artist then made arrangements for the worship of this idol by all people (14:17-21). The reference to the far away rulers and the accusation that they call idolatry peace refer to the Roman period in which the Jews had to undergo persecution. It was the rule of Augustus which initiated not only the imperial cult but also a period of peace which was known as Pax Romana (Roman peace). The first section of this part concludes with a rejection of idolatry and with the affirmation that having knowledge of the true God is the sign of the beginning of eternal life. Those who make or wish to have idols are friends of evil.

The second section of the discussion on idolatry (15:7-18) narrates the making of idols from clay: the idol-makers do not know that they are doing a sin (15:13). Those who oppress the people of God, who do not worship idols, are fools and are in miserable condition (15:14); they even adore the most hateful animals (15:18).

After stating that the enemies of the people of God are in a miserable condition, the book continues till the end with a narration of how God destroyed the enemies of his people in Egypt (16-19). This experience should be an encouragement for the people who now undergo suffering in the same land. If idolatry was the reason for the defeat of pharaoh and his people the same history will also be repeated even today. The sage thus encouraged the people to preserve their faith even amidst persecution. The book ends with the following prayer: "For in everything, O Lord, you have exalted and glorified your people, and you have not neglected to help them at all times and in all places" (19:22).

In the beginning of our discussion on wisdom tradition, we said that a sage has to open his eyes, see the marvelous things done by God in the universe, and learn the law of God that he has established there. The same idea is explicitly stated in this last book: "For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their creator" (13:5). Idols were the principal obstacle on the way of man to his God, because the idolaters attribute to their idols, the things that are done by God. The most important obstacle on the way of man to his God is his own idol. That is why the author discusses this issue in detail.

The questions 'why did the author appeal to wisdom when speaking

to his contemporaries?' should also be answered. In fact the concept of wisdom worked as a perfect bridge between the exclusive nationalist tradition of Israel and the universalist philosophical tradition which was acceptable to the Jewish youth of Roman Alexandria.⁹²

The Book of Wisdom and the New Testament

Since wisdom is historically speaking the last book of the Old Testament and it contains a more developed theology that comes close to the New Testament theology, the Book of Wisdom might be considered as a link between the OT and the NT. This is the book that gives the most developed notions of the biblical wisdom tradition. Although written before the formation of the NT the book might not have influenced the NT.

In the book, the author presents to his readers that wisdom is greater than Torah of God given through Moses. Torah needs interpretation which only wisdom can give. This would be realized in the New Testament especially in Luke (Luke 24:25-27). Early Church conceived Jesus as the wisdom of God (1Cor 1:24). The Law and the prophets should be interpreted according to the wisdom of God (Luke 24:25-27). The link of the traditional notion of the personified wisdom with the philosophical notion of the active/creative word of God eventually resulted in a complete identification of wisdom with the son of God in the gospel of John.

One of the principal contributions of the book seems to be its notion of God that is closer to NT theology of the Trinity. Following the tradition of the sages, the author first visualized a transcended and almighty God; he also defined the personalized wisdom as the power that emanates from this God (7:25) who becomes the mediator between God and world. The sage saw this wisdom as a person (7:23; 8:1-8). He defined this wisdom as the creative word of God: "O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy, who have made all things by your word" (9:1).

The personification of wisdom was underlined when the author saw the angel of God in Egypt as wisdom. Visualizing the angel of God who destroyed the first born of the Egyptians he said the following words: "14 For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, 15 your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that

was doomed, a stern warrior 16 carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command, and stood and filled all things with death, and touched heaven while standing on the earth" (18:14-16). That means that the sage conceived the word of God as a person and as the power that comes from the creator-God. He also conceived wisdom as the word of God that heals man from diseases (16:12), as the word that feeds humankind (16:25-26) and as the word that calms the wrath of God (18:21-22).

The sage also conceived wisdom as the spirit of God. He saw wisdom as pervading the whole world; he had already personified this wisdom: "Because the spirit of the Lord has filled the world, and that which holds all things together knows what is said..." (1:7). He confesses this before God: "For your immortal spirit is in all things" (12:1). He also says that this spirit comes from God: "Who has learned your counsel, unless you have given wisdom and sent your holy spirit from on high?" (9:17). Wisdom (Spirit of God) sets the path of the people on earth right and teaches them what pleases God (9:18). Since the sage has personified the word of God (Wisdom) and the spirit of God (Wisdom) he although unaware has pointed his finger to the NT revelation of Trinity.

Like Sirach the author of the book also calls God his *father*. According to the unrighteous, the righteous boasts that God is his father, says the author (2:16). After observing the foolish act of the sailors the sage makes the following comments: "It is your providence, O *Father*, that steers its (ship) course, because you have given it a path in the sea, and a safe way through the waves" (14:3). It is God who guides them and not an idol. Thus the sage sees God as his father which is one of the important revelations of NT.

The Book of Wisdom also presents three other important points that are more evident in the NT but are either absent or unclear in the OT:

1. Belief in the resurrection of the dead (3:1; 4:7, 16).
2. Belief in the judgment after death (4:6, 20).
3. Belief that the righteous will inherit eternal life (4:7, 16-17; 3:13-14; 2:23; 6:9). We have already discussed these points.

All these notions are major themes in the NT. By introducing these elements in the OT, the wisdom tradition prepares way for the

revelation in the NT. What one may conclude is the following: the sage who sought the creator of the universe with a universal openness eventually recognized the God of Israel as the only God (Sir 24; 36:5). This openness further led him to divine truths that will later be clarified in the NT. That seems the reason why St Paul exhorts the Romans the following: "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: 21 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Rom 1:20-21).

End Notes

- ⁸² Cf. D. Winston, "Wisdom of Solomon," *ABD* VI, 120-127; F. Focke, *Die Entstehung der Weisheit Salomos*, Göttingen, FRLANT 5.5, 1913, 86.
- ⁸³ Cf. D. Winston, "Wisdom of Solomon," 120.
- ⁸⁴ Cf. D. Winston, "Wisdom of Solomon," 122-123.
- ⁸⁵ C. Larcher, *Le Livre de la Sagesse ou la Sagesse de Salomon*, EB. 3 vols., Paris, 1983-85, 141-161
- ⁸⁶ Cf. B.A. Pearson, "Alexandria," *ABD* I, 152-153
- ⁸⁷ Cf. T.H. Thobin, "Logos," *ABD* IV, 348-356
- ⁸⁸ Cf. D. Winston, "Wisdom of Solomon," *ABD* VI, 124-125; H. Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom*, Lund, 1947, 49-52; C. Kayatz, *Studien zu Proverbien 1-9*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1966, 93-119.
- ⁸⁹ Cf. H. Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom*, 53-58
- ⁹⁰ D. Winston, "Wisdom of Solomon," *ABD* VI, 126.
- ⁹¹ Cf. D. Winston, "Wisdom of Solomon," 125.
- ⁹² Cf. D. Winston, "Wisdom of Solomon," 124-125

Chapter 9

Development of the Wisdom Theology

Canonically speaking the Bible (OT) is composed of three parts: the Law, Prophets, and wisdom books. The Law and the Prophets give the history of redemption and God's actions for Israel (and God's actions through Israel for humanity). It is the record of the redemptive divine seeking of humankind. By contrast, wisdom writings in general record the human search for the creator of the world. Just as any other human society, the ancient Israelites also had their history of divine search. The history of this search is recorded in the biblical wisdom books. A study of these books in the order of their historical origin can uncover the theological development that happens in the world of the Israelite sages.

Among the biblical wisdom books, Psalms was taken first for our discussion because this book being the summary of the whole Bible, works as a link that connects the three main parts of the Bible. Psalms are prayers and instructions for a righteous life before God. They record the God experience and righteous disposi-

tions of the faithful devotees in various situations in life. They also try to instruct people to act blamelessly.

After the Book of Psalms, Proverbs gets our attention because this book records the oldest form of wisdom thinking and means of teaching. When man began to live in groups, people needed more refined way of life and behavior that would make social existence possible. This demanded the formation of the members of the society. This duty would then be done in the families. The members of the same family used to sit together and speak communicating valuable insights to the new generations. Older generations reflected on modes of exemplary conduct, and these thoughts were formulated in maxims which combined practical and moral learning. This seems to be the origin of proverbs. Several proverbs in the Bible appear only to be the Israelite version of the wisdom of the Ancient Near East which proves their antiquity.

The same process of education of the individuals was later systematically carried out when schools originated in Israel under the leadership of sages and kings. With the invention of writing and the systematization of education, many of these proverbs and other insights were collected and put in writing. This must have then served as a kind of text book for formal education and for the training of scribes.

The sages were seeking the creator-God who was thought to be righteous. He was one who established and preserved the order in the universe. God had created the world by establishing an order which had both an external and an internal dimension. Man being a creature of God and a seeker of his creator was expected to seek and find him, who revealed himself through this order and through his personal intervention in the life of each and every individual. He wants to preserve this order not only in the material world but also in the moral life of man. In order to promote an orderly moral and social life, the sages formulated maxims that were mainly based on the theory of retribution which according to them would ensure righteousness in the society that was the basis for the divinely implanted order.

God expected that man should seek his creator, who revealed himself through the orderly movement of the universe. This order was personified as a woman who was labeled as wisdom. The success of man would depend on man's capacity to comprehend the divinely implanted order in the universe. How much one is able to understand

this order and adjust himself to this, so much will his life be successful and happy. These were the insights and experience of the sages.

The Book of Proverbs which contained these insights thus taught two main principles that should guide a person if he is to find success in life: respect for the principle of retribution and comprehension of wisdom as the means to attain success and happiness. In addition, proverbs were taught, spoken, and written as if they were instructions for the young men of the society which apparently disregarded the women.

The content and way of teaching of Proverbs created a threefold reaction in the subsequent centuries. While teaching their students about the God who preserved the universe by preserving the implanted order, the sages had to teach their students that God always rewarded the good works and punished evil. This slowly led to the exaggeration and dogmatization of the principle of retribution. If the principle so dogmatized, God would lose his freedom to act according to his free will. Once dogmatized, the theory became object of criticism, because several human experiences proved the contrary. Several just people appeared to suffer unjustly. This was what came out from the experience of the righteous people who were carried into Babylonian exile and brought to slavery.

As an answer to the problem raised by this and similar experiences of righteous people's suffering was the Book of Job composed which taught that God's mind was incomprehensible for man and his plans were beyond human understanding. Sufferings might be the result of evil human acts; it might also be the result of some incomprehensible divine plan. The book asked people to accept life as it was given to them without lamenting over the sufferings so that their life agreed with the divine will and plan; only such a disposition could make one wise and lead him to success in life. Lamenting over the divinely planned sufferings as well as trying in vain to interpret the reasons of all the sufferings applying the principle of retribution are useless and meaningless.

If human suffering can thus be interpreted, what about the happiness in life? Is happiness always the consequence of the acquisition of wisdom? The answer comes from the wisdom of Qoheleth. Proverbs had linked happiness and success with the acquisition and the amount of wisdom that one had. Although this was generally true,

the dogmatization of this notion would make the situation complicated. Qoheleth who analyzed the whole life of man found that chance had played a great role in human life. God was free to give everyone according to his plans irrespective of his wisdom and longing for wisdom. In the life of man, God, according to the divine design, has given a time for everything. Man has to use the given opportunities wisely, and try to enjoy the given life as the gift of God, because after this life everyone goes to the land of the dead and man cannot find any enjoyment there. Like sufferings, happiness also is a gift of God. The sage in Qoheleth invited people to enjoy the God-given life; however, man also has to fear God. Seeing human being as a social animal, Qoheleth invited them to be moderate in everything because exaggeration of ideas would make one intolerant towards others which would consequently destroy the social life. In evaluating the human experiences in relation to the greatness of God, Job and Qoheleth are mutually complementary.

The neglect of women by Proverbs will also create a reaction in the subsequent centuries which is visible in Song of Songs. Proverbs were mainly wisdom communicated by fathers/masters to their sons/students. Young men were cautioned against the temptations of loose women. Songs appears to be wisdom communicated by a woman-sage to young women cautioning them to be aware of the temptations of insincere young men. Sex is one of the important divine gifts to man; this gift helps people to enjoy life, and it is the gift that makes the existence of humankind possible through regeneration. One has to value this great gift and protect it so that she/he can find happiness through the gift. If not protected, it would end up as a great disaster.

The next wisdom book, Sirach, records the theological growth of the Israelite wisdom tradition to the point of attaining openness not only to the Jewish Law and the Prophets but also to the wisdom tradition of the nations around. In the cultural background of the Hellenistic period, Sirach thought of God as the creator of the universe which led him to the notion of monotheism. That means that God of the universe is the redeemer-God of Israel; consequently, Sirach identified the universal law of the wisdom tradition with the Mosaic Law given to Israel by God.

Monotheism also led the sage to the following important insights: if Mosaic Law is the same as the universal law of God and is thus

important, then the temple built according to the Law, the sacrifices prescribed by the Law, and the priests who offer them following the Law are also important. This was a serious development in the thinking mode of the sages because generally they were not concerned with the national or religious ideologies. According to Sirach religious commitment was inseparably connected with social justice. A mechanical fulfillment of the religious duties would not help one to be justified before the creator. Sacrifices in the temple were to be accompanied by a corresponding just attitude in one's social life.

The comprehensiveness of Sirach is also visible in his vision of the wisdom of the other nations. According to Sirach, one who was interested to know the law of God had to learn all the wisdom that God had communicated to humankind, wherever they were and without looking into their religion and culture. This comprehensive vision of Sirach however was openness without a leniency towards syncretism. Sirach being a sage, who was in search of his creator, also thought of God as his father. This vision brought him close to the theology of the New Testament. His moral teachings seem to have influenced the moral teachings of the New Testament.

The last wisdom book, *Wisdom of Solomon*, was written in Alexandria and it reflects the persecution of the Roman period. The author with the help of Greek philosophical notions tried to interpret the traditional notion of wisdom found in the wisdom tradition of Israel. In tradition, wisdom was conceived as the co-worker of God in the activity of creation. To the Jews in Alexandria, who were monotheists and had acquired a philosophical mind, this notion of wisdom as a person different from God was incomprehensible. The sage wished to explain to them what wisdom really is. Employing middle-Platonists' notion of logos, therefore, the sage presented wisdom as the dynamic part of the creator-God that was thought to be the intermediary between the transcendent God and the empirical world: wisdom was the image of God. She was thought to be the image of God that was active in the mind of man and in the world.

This divine logos, was the creative word of God, who was thought to be a person. The author also saw wisdom (logos) as the spirit of God. According to him, the basic law of God was the order (wisdom) that he had implanted in the universe. Mosaic Law was only an image of this universal divine law. In order to interpret the Mosaic Law

therefore one needed the help of the universal divine law (logos). This thought, which was also evident in Philo, would gain its full growth in the gospel of John in which logos would be identified with the son of the only God who was thought to be the agent of creation (Jn 1:3). By identifying logos with the word of God and the spirit of God, the sage also prepared the background for the New Testament revelation of the Trinity. In addition, the reflection on the just reward of the righteous led him to the notion of a life after death, last judgment, reward for the just, and the punishment for the evildoers after death. By introducing the initial notions of the Trinity, by presenting the idea of the resurrection after death, judgment and reward after this life, and by calling God his father, the author made a great preparation for the teachings in the New Testament.

The sages of the wisdom tradition who with openness began to reflect on the works of God in the universe slowly grew in their understanding of the divine mysteries unveiled in the world, and could eventually come to a high level of knowledge that comes very close to the revelation in the New Testament.

Wisdom tradition basically records the history of human search for God and biblical wisdom tradition is only a part of that great achievement of humanity. These sages who in the beginning started to reflect on the work of the righteous creator first arrived at the principle of retribution (Proverbs); in the next stage they found that this theory was not exclusively true and God's judgment were incomprehensible (Job).

As the next stage, the notion of God's righteousness led them to the belief that the God of the universe who gave his universal law (wisdom) and the redeemer of Israel who commanded the Mosaic Law were one and the same (Sirach); accordingly, the universal law of God and the Mosaic Law would be one and the same (Sir 24). This implied that the demands of Mosaic Law were as important as demands of universal law which demanded social justice (cf. Sir 3:30; 4:8-10; 34-35).

The mystery of the righteousness of God yet remained an enigma for the sages. Sirach then found a temporary answer through his notion that God was able to reward or punish people even in a moment before their death (11:26-27). Still the issue disturbed the mind of the sages which would later lead them to the idea that even if one was

not rewarded in this world, the eternal God was able to reward him after his life on earth. This thought slowly guided the sages to the notion of life after death and last judgment (Wisdom of Solomon).

Similarly, in the beginning, the comprehension and the adjustment of life according to the divinely established order/wisdom was thought to be necessary for success and happiness (Proverbs); although this notion was often proved from experiences, experience also proved that the theory was not always true; this led the sages to recognize the greatness of God and the incapacity of man to comprehend the divine plans, which would lead the sage to a kind of uncertainty in life (Qoheleth); further reflection on the meaning of wisdom in the context of the Hellenistic culture led the sages to the notion of the creative word of God (wisdom), and the all pervading spirit of God (wisdom). The personification of the word of God and the spirit of God (Wisdom of Solomon) would eventually lead to the belief in the Triune God that will clearly be revealed in the New Testament. Wisdom literature can thus be seen as the universal divine preparation for the introduction of the message of the New Testament.

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