

Wisdom and the Wise

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1. Introduction

“Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom.

Though it cost all you have, get understanding.” (Prov 4:7)

The proverbial exhortation calls for some deeper study of the wisdom genre. Here, we provide a focus on the study of the words ‘wisdom’ (Hebr. *chokmah*) and ‘wise’ (Hebr. *chakam*) as they are used in the wisdom literature Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. In the third chapter we will expand on the word study by including the other canonical books, the Old Testament as well as the New Testament.

After general considerations about the semantic range of the word-group, we will concentrate on biblical research but do not reflect on the wisdom movement in general which would include additional study of the extra-biblical sources. It may be added here that much of the wisdom texts are similar in format to that of other cultures, e.g. Prov 22:17-24:34 which seems to be modeled on the Egyptian teachings of Amenemope. Yet the subject of wisdom in the Old Testament is unique since it strongly relates to a personal God. Biblical wisdom is rooted in Yahweh himself.

The work is shaped in the spirit of biblical theology. We study along the biblical texts instead of pursuing a dogmatic approach, and so we try to find out some basic features of the biblical teaching on wisdom. The essay concludes with considerations about the practical significance of ‘wisdom’ for us today.

2. חֵכְמָה and חָכָם in the Wisdom Canon

a. Semantic Range

The Hebrew noun חֵכְמָה (*chokmah*) derives from the primitive root חָכָם (*chakam*) and appears 157 times in the Old Testament.¹ In the wisdom literature *chokmah* is used 18 times in Job, 39 times in Proverbs and 28 times in Ecclesiastes. Besides the word is only prominent in the sections about King Solomon, namely in the first book of Kings (chapters 1-11) and in the second of Chronicles (chapters 1-9).

The King James Version (KJV) usually translates *chokmah* as ‘wisdom’ and only two times as ‘wisely.’ (Prov 28:26; Eccl 7:10) Once it is translated as ‘wits’ where it refers to the sailor’s wisdom of navigation skills. (Ps 107:27) Another exception is 1 Chronicles 28:21 where the word refers to the skilful craftsman. The New International Version (NIV) more often translates *chokmah* as ‘skill’ which indicates the practical aspects of biblical wisdom. One example is Hiram who was good in bronze work, and so he was filled with ‘wisdom’ (KJV) in the sense of ‘skill’ (NIV) and not mere theoretical knowledge. (1 Ki 7:14) *Chokmah* in the rather practical sense is even used to denote skilfulness in warfare.² (Is 10:3)

¹ According to James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (electronic ed.) (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996), no. 2451, 2452; cf. John Hurt, “King James Bible Hebrew Concordance,” *The HTML Bible* [home page on-line]; available from <<http://www.htmlbible.com/sacrednamebiblecom/kjvstrongs/>>; Internet (accessed 29 October 2007).

² Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English*

The Hebrew word חָכָם (*chakam*) appears 164 times in the Old Testament.³ The word is used 59 times in Proverbs and 25 times in Ecclesiastes. In the Qal stem *chakam* usually means ‘be wise’ and often designates the ‘wise man.’ (e.g. Eccl 7:7) In the Piel stem the meaning is ‘making wise’ or ‘teaching’.⁴ Like *chokmah* above, *chakam* can also refer to the skillfulness of a person and then denotes a ‘cunning’ man as sometimes translated in the KJV. (2 Chr 2:7; 2:13; Is 3:3; 40:20; Jer 9:17; 10:9)

For the sake of instruction, even the animals are called ‘wise.’ (Prov 6:6; 30:24) Such teachings indicate that wisdom is also embodied in creation.⁵ (cf. Job 28:23–27; Ps 104:24; Prov 3:19f.; 8:22–31) Solomon’s way of attaining wisdom consisted largely in the exploration of the natural world. (1 Kings 4:33). The wise said, “I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw” (Prov. 24:32), and Solomon himself recorded, “I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven.” (Eccles. 1:13; cf. 2:3; 7:25) In other words, “the essential idea of *hakam* represents a manner of thinking and attitude concerning life’s experiences.”⁶ Such observation includes intellectual and moral issues.

Lexicon of the Old Testament (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 315.

³ James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, no. 2449, 2450.

⁴ Harris, R. Laird, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980), no. 647.

⁵ Cf. John W. Hilber, “Old Testament Wisdom and the Integration Debate in Christian Counseling,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (October 1998), 414.

⁶ Harris, R. Laird et al., *Theological Wordbook*, no. 647.

The subject of wisdom relates to both the learner and the teacher.⁷ To the learner, wisdom comes along with instruction (*muwcar*). (Prov 1:2.3; 19:20; 23:23) The wise teacher brings the instruction he learned. (cf. Prov 13:14; 15:7; 31:26) That wisdom is first of all a matter of thought is also shown by the related expressions ‘understanding’ and ‘knowledge’. In numerous cases ‘understanding’ (*biyn, biynah, tabuwn*) is used as a synonym for ‘wisdom’ for poetic emphasis. (Prov 1:2; 2:2.6; 3:13.19; 4:5.7; 5:1; 7:4; 8:1.5.14; 9:10; 10:13.23; 11:12; 14:33; 15:21; 16:16; 17:24; 19:8; 21:30; 23:23; 24:3; Job 12:12.13; 28:12.20.28; 38:36; 39:17) In other verses the Bible closely relates ‘knowledge’ (*da`ath*) to ‘wisdom’. (Prov 1:7; 2:6.10; 8:12; 14:6; 21:11; 30:3; Job 34:35; Eccl 1:16.18; 2:21.26; 7:12; 9:10)

Another important wisdom synonym is the primitive root *sakal* as used for ‘wisdom’ in Prov 1:3 instead of *chokmah* as in Prov 1:2. (cf. Job 34:35) The word denotes prudence and understanding with some emphasis on prosperity that derives from such wisdom. (Prov 19:14) Also the exalted Messiah is characterized by *sakal*.⁸ (Jer 23:5; Is 52:13) The moral element may inhere in such wisdom. Elsewhere the ‘wise’ and the ‘righteous’ man (*tsaddiyq, tsâdaqah*) are synonymous. (Prov 9:9; cf. 8:20; 10:31) Jensen explicitly designates the wise man as a Christian.⁹

⁷ Brown, Francis et al., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 315.

⁸ Harris, R. Laird et al., *Theological Wordbook*, no. 647.

⁹ Irving L. Jensen, *Proverbs*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 27, 39-41.

The interrelationship of the Hebrew words can also be seen in the LXX version. The most prominent Greek translation for *chokmah* in the LXX is *σοφία* (*sophia*), which is not only used to designate ‘wisdom’ but also stands for ‘understanding’ (*biynah* in Prov 2:3; 3:5 and *tabuwn* in Prov 18:2; 1 Ki 4:29), ‘knowledge’ (*da`ath* in Prov 1:7, 29), ‘instruction’ (*muwcar* in Prov 8:33), ‘device’ (*machashabah* in Ex 35:33) and ‘prudence’ (*sekel* in 1 Chr 22:12). *Chakam* is translated as *σοφός* (*sophos*). Both the noun and the adjective always indicate an attribute and not an action. The Greek word for the verb *chakam* (‘to be wise’) is *σοφίζω* (*sophizo*), which is also used for translation of ‘to understand’ (hebr. *bîn*).¹⁰

The word-group implies knowledge together with unusual ability and skill, something that is also inherent in the Hebrew expressions. Though, at the time of Plato and Aristotle, the idea of practical wisdom soon stepped behind the concentration on theoretical knowledge. *Sophia* is also found in the Greek idea of ‘philosophia.’ Thus the subject of wisdom in the Septuagint with its element of moral conduct marked by the fear of God (Prov 1:7; 9:10) should not be interpreted in light of the secular currents of the Greek world.¹¹ Biblical wisdom goes beyond the realm of the intellect and comprises moral conduct and even technical skills.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Goetzmann, *The New Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), s.v. „Wisdom,“ no. OT1.

¹¹ See also Harris, R. Laird et al., *Theological Wordbook*, no. 647.

b. Biblical Theology

The fear of the Lord is the starting point for understanding biblical wisdom¹² (Prov 1:7; 2:5; 9:10; 15:33), and the introduction of Proverbs 1:1-7 leads to the theme. Proverbs was explicitly written for attaining *chokmah*. (Prov 1:2) Here, wisdom is first linked to moral discipline and conduct, but secondly includes the mere mental understanding of wisdom sayings like proverbs, parables and riddles. (Prov 1:2.6)

The existence of such special sayings suggests that the wise constituted a distinct class within Israel and even beyond. A good example of extra-biblical wisdom is the already mentioned teaching of Amenemope. Its close affinity with Proverbs 22:17-24:22 shows the horizon of biblical wisdom that goes beyond the national covenant theology.¹³ The sayings of King Lemuel (Prov. 31:1-9) are non-Israelite, too, and this may also be true of the words of Agur (Prov 30:1-33). The prophets often refer to 'wisdom' or 'wise men' from other nations.¹⁴

Comparison with Israel's neighbours shows that the fear of the Lord is the distinct ingredient of biblical wisdom. It is both the initial point and the essence of

¹² Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 17.

¹³ Cf. Donald K. Berry, *An Introduction to Wisdom and Poetry of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 32, 121.

¹⁴ Cf. Isaiah 47:10; Jeremiah 49:7; 50:35; 51:57; Ezekiel 28:3; Daniel 1:20; Obadiah 1:8; Zechariah 9:2; see also chapter three below.

wisdom.¹⁵ Without fearing God man cannot attain wisdom. Reversely, man cannot be wise and fail to fear God. (cf. Prov 3:7; 14:16) The key proverbial teaching on wisdom resembles the end of the matter in Ecclesiastes, where the Teacher exhorts proper conduct in the fear of God and his law. (Eccl 12:13; cf. 3:14, 5:7, 7:18, 8:12f.) Job similarly concludes, “The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom.” (Job 28:28)

The personification of wisdom in Proverbs (Prov 1:20-33; 8:1-9:12) shows that biblical wisdom is not an abstract concept. Wisdom invites, and whoever rejects wisdom ultimately rejects God.¹⁶ Everyone is invited (Prov 8:1), and since wisdom is supreme, it is worth to be attained. (Prov 4:7; cf. Prov 2:2; 4:5; 5:1; 16:16; 23:23) Because all wisdom resides with God (Job 9:4; 12:13) only God can give ‘wisdom.’ (Prov 2:6; Eccl 2:26; Job 11:6; 28:23; 35:11; 38:36-37) He rejects the man who is wise in his own eyes. (Job 5:13; cf. Prov 26:5.12.16) Accordingly, wisdom comes with humility. (Prov 11:2; 13:10; 15:33) The wise even knows that he cannot fully comprehend what goes on under the sun. (Eccl 8:17; cf. 7:16.23; Prov 30:3) Since God in his wisdom created the world (Prov 3:19), all creation is controlled by him.¹⁷

¹⁵ John E. Johnson, “An Analysis of Proverbs 1:1-7,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (October 1987): 431.

¹⁶ Duane A. Garret, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 72.

¹⁷ Smith regards this fundamental relationship between sovereign God and the world he created as the unifying principle that gives wisdom theology its place in Old Testament theology; see Gary V. Smith, “Is there a Place for Job’s Wisdom in Old Testament Theology?”, *Trinity Journal* 13 (Spring 1992), 18.

Hence those who are truly *chakam* humble themselves before God and listen to instruction. (Prov 1:5; 8:33; 9:8-9; 10:8.14; 12:15; 13:1; 15:31; 18:15; 19:20; 21:11; 23:19; cf. Eccl 4:13) One channel of instruction is the family, where children are taught even by way of correction. (Prov 29:3.15; cf. Job 12:12; 32:7) The wise son brings joy to the instructing father (Prov 10:1; 15:20; 23:15.24; 27:11) and even to himself (Eccl 8:1); he passes the instruction on and benefits others through his proper speech (Prov 12:18; cf. 13:14; 15:2.7; 16:21.23; 25:12; cf. Eccl 7:5; 9:17; 10:12; 12:9.11), even spoken at the proper time. (Eccl 8:5) Here, the proverbial teaching on wisdom lays some emphasis on the mental sphere. Eventually, the wise inherits honor (Prov 3:35) and reward (Prov 9:12), an aspect introduced by the synonym *sakal*.

Concerning the moral and practical elements of *chokmah*, we read that the wise are in many ways protected by their wisdom. They guard their words (Prov 14:3; 16:14; 29:8.11) and restrain from alcoholism (Prov 20:1) and adultery. (Prov 7:4-5) Wisdom protects one's life (Prov 28:26; Eccl 7:12) and "by wisdom a house is built." (Prov 24:3) Whereas in Ecclesiastes *chokmah* conveys the idea of skill in general terms (Eccl 2:21; 9:10; 10:10), in Proverbs it points to the "skill of living."¹⁸ Wisdom not only includes proper speech (Prov 10:13.31; 18:4; cf. Job 13:5) but, always and

¹⁸ John E. Johnson, "An Analysis of Proverbs 1:1-7," 425; cf. Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 905.

above all, proper conduct, too, because ‘wisdom’ hates evil (Prov 8:13; 10:23) and therefore the ‘wise’ shun to do evil. (Prov 3:7; 14:16) Again, by implication the fear of the Lord is the key to the secret of skilful living.¹⁹

As indicated in the previous chapter, the companions of wisdom are prudence, knowledge, and understanding. Proverbs further mentions discretion, counsel, sound judgement, and also power. (Prov 8:11-12; 14.6.8.33; 17:24) The rule of the wise is powerful. (Prov 20:26; 21:22; 24:5; cf. Eccl 7:19; 9:15) In comparison, the fool is always and in every respect inferior to the wise. (Prov 10:2; 11:29; 13:20; 14:24; 15:12; 28:11) On the other hand, Ecclesiastes points out that, though “wisdom is better than folly” (Eccl 2:13), both the wise and the fool share the same fate of a meaningless secular life. (Eccl 6:8) Also the wise are in God’s hands. (Eccl 9:1.11) The Teacher reminds us that the wise must die just like the fool. (Eccl 2:14-16) Though, only the wise gain wisdom through contemplation about death. (Eccl 7:4) The teachings recall the strong link between wisdom and the realities of life.

In summary, the biblical theme of the fear of God remains the focal aspect of wisdom theology. Elsewhere this idiom provides a bridge to Israel’s covenant law.²⁰ (cf. Deut 6:24) Also the book of Proverbs mentions some kind of ‘law’ (hebr. תּוֹרָה;

¹⁹ John W. Hilber, “Old Testament Wisdom,” 421.

²⁰ Cf. Gary V. Smith, “Is there a Place for Job’s Wisdom in Old Testament Theology?”, 8.

cf. Prov 1:8; 3:1; 13:14; 28:4.7) and ‘commandments’ (hebr. מִצְוָה; cf. Prov 2:1; 3:1; 4:4; 6:23). The harmony of the themes later developed into a union as expressed by Ben Sirach: “If you delight in wisdom, then keep his commandments.” (Sir 1:26) Nonetheless, from the standpoint of biblical wisdom theology, wisdom is much broader and not confined to the moral teachings of the covenant law. Additional study of the other books may shed more light on the subject.

3. Wisdom outside the Wisdom Canon

a. Old Testament

Whereas the focus of the wisdom literature is the teaching on wisdom, other parts of the Old Testament provide concrete examples of wise people and their conduct. In Genesis the model of a ‘wise man’ is Joseph. He is the ‘man of wisdom’²¹ the Pharaoh was searching for. (Gen 41:33) In line with the wisdom sayings, he got his wisdom from God. (Gen 41:39) In particular, Joseph acted wisely when he fled from Potiphar’s wife. He did not commit adultery and did not “sin against his God” (Gen 39:9), but instead he feared the Lord. Even before Israel received the Mosaic covenant, Joseph knew and followed God’s will. It is added that the wisdom of Joseph was superior to “all the magicians and wise men of Egypt.” (Gen 41:8) The whole

²¹ As translated in the ‘Bible in Basic English’ (BBE); the title distinguishes Joseph from the other people examined by the Pharaoh.

record about Joseph heightens the importance of the fear of God and distinguishes Israel's biblical wisdom from the secular wisdom of the other nations.

Deuteronomy clearly relates wisdom to Israel's covenant law. (cf. Deut 4:6) People who break the covenant are called 'unwise.' (Deut 32:6; cf. 32:29) Those whom Moses appointed as leaders or judges were "wise, understanding and respected men." (Deut 1:13; cf. Deut 1:15; 16:19) Wisdom here pertains to the administration of affairs, like in Joseph's rule before.²² The office of judges required the knowledge of the law and especially the ability to apply the law to real life situations.

First among the sages was Moses. His exodus ministry, too, stands in contrast to the inferior deeds of the Egyptian 'wise men.' (Ex 7:11) The comparison again shows the superiority of biblical wisdom since true wisdom comes from Yahweh alone. At the end of Moses' life, the spirit of wisdom was also given to Joshua. (Deut 34:9) The event recalls that the source of all wisdom is God and his spirit: "For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." (Prov 2:6)

Wisdom was not only attributed to men but also to women. (Judg 5:29; 2 Sam 14:2; 20:16.22; cf. Prov 31:26) The wise woman of Tekoa praised King David that he had "wisdom like that of an angel of God" (2 Sam 14:20), and, even by citing a wisdom proverb derived from the observation of nature²³ (2 Sam 14:14a), she led

²² Brown, Francis et al., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 314.

²³ John W. Hilber, "Old Testament Wisdom," 419.

David to the rather unwise decision to allow Absalom entry into Jerusalem, which later turned into conspiracy against him. Her kind of wisdom is often described as ‘shrewdness’.²⁴ Related references are Jer 9:22, Job 39:17 and Is 47:10.

Superior wisdom was given to Solomon. (1 Ki 3:12; 2 Chr 1:12) His source of wisdom was God who listened to his prayer. (cf. 1 Ki 3:6-14; 2 Chr 1:8-12; cf. 1 Ki 3:28; 4:29; 5:12; 10:24) The reason for Solomon’s request was his burden being appointed to govern the Israel nation. Like Joseph and Moses before him, he needed wisdom for the administration of affairs.

It is recorded that he had deep understanding and wide knowledge of proverbs and other teachings. (cf. 1 Ki 4:32-33) Besides, he was also wise in practice. The story of the two prostitutes provides a vivid example of his wise government. (1 Ki 3:16-28) His unconventional manner to settle the dispute shows that his wisdom was not limited to the strict application of the law.²⁵ Solomon’s example illustrates the broad range of biblical wisdom beyond Israel’s covenant theology.

The texts also emphasize that, like Joseph and Moses, Solomon was much wiser than the people of Egypt. (1 Ki 4:30.31; cf. 1 Ki 10:23; 2 Chr 9:22) The record about the queen of Sheba highlights his *chokmah* in comparison to the wisdom of the other

²⁴ Brown, Francis et al., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 314f.; Harris, R. Laird et al., *Theological Wordbook*, no. 647.

²⁵ John W. Hilber, “Old Testament Wisdom,” 418.

nations even more. (1 Ki 10:1-13; 2 Chr 9:1-12) Like many other passages, Solomon's story reveals that Yahweh is the only source of true wisdom.

Sadly and ironically, wise Solomon later stumbled because of his many wives. In particular, Solomon disobeyed the law God explicitly gave for kings. (cf. Deut 17:17) Though he was the Old Testament wisdom model par excellence, he also provides an example that even the formerly wise man inevitably fails by way of breaking the law. Wisdom is anchored in the fear of God.

That wisdom can also imply technical skilfulness is shown in the records about the construction of the tabernacle and later about the building of the temple.²⁶ In Exodus, *chokmah* (Ex 28:3; 31:3.6; 35:26; 35:31.35; 36:1.2) and *chakam* (Ex 28:3; 31:6; 35:10.25; 36:1.2.8) are used to describe the attributes of the chosen people who built the tabernacle and other objects according to God's commands. The given task already indicates that their wisdom was not confined to theoretical knowledge but also comprised the practical skills that they needed.

The New International Version often translates *chokmah* as 'skill' and 'ability'. (Ex 31:3.6, 35:26.31.35; 36:1.2) The people who worked at the Temple were 'skilled' men. (1 Chr 22:15; 2 Chr 2:7.14), and also the men of Tyre were said to be 'wise' (KJV) in the sense of 'skilful' (NIV). (Zech 9:2) Significantly, Scripture again

²⁶ Cf. Brown, Francis et al., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 314.

emphasizes that God was the source of their *chokmah*. God says they were “skilled men to whom I have given wisdom.” (Ex 28:3) Bezalel and Oholiab were filled by God “with skill to do all kinds of work as craftsmen.” (Ex 35:35; cf. 31:3; 35:31)

The Psalms, too, evoke many wisdom features. Again, wisdom is linked to the covenant law. (Ps 19:7f.; 37:30-31; 119:98) Wisdom resides with God, took part in creation, and comes from Him who teaches man. (Ps 51:6; 104:24; cf. Jer 10:12; 51:15) The wisdom of Joseph is also recalled. (Ps 105:17-22) Like in Ecclesiastes, wisdom is attained by meditation about death (Ps 90:12) and about the fact that both the wise and the foolish will die. (Ps 49:10) The most important theme is restated: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” (Ps 111:10)

Isaiah prophesied that the Spirit of wisdom will rest on Christ himself. (Is 11:2) The prophets often renounced human wisdom (Is 10:13; 29:14; 47:10; Jer 8:9; 9:23; Ezk 28:3-7; Is 31:1-2) and cursed “those who are wise in their own eyes.” (Is 5:21; cf. 19:11-12; 29:14; 44:25; Jer 50:35; 51:57; Ezk 27:8-9; Obad 1:8) Isaiah also recalls the key theme of the fear of the Lord. (Is 33:6) Jeremiah prophesied against those who are “wise” (KJV) or “skilled” (NIV) to do evil (Jer 4:22), who reject God’s word and his law. (Jer 8:8-9) For Jeremiah, the wise possess wisdom since they know God and are instructed by him. (Jer 9:12.23-24; Hos 14:9) No wise man can be compared with the wise Lord himself. (Jer 10:7) God also gave wisdom to Daniel and his friends, and so

they were wiser than the magicians of the Babylonian kingdom. (Dan 1:17.20; 2:20-23; 5:11.14; cf. Ezk 28:3) The same can be implied in Ezra's case. (Ezr 7:25)

Thus in summary, many of the features taught in the wisdom literature are recalled in the other Old Testament works. Most important is the focus on the fear of the Lord and loyalty to his decrees. Models like Joseph, Moses and Solomon illustrate and teach us wisdom through proper conduct. Sadly, Solomon added to the teaching by his negative example of breaking the law. Law-keeping is essential for the wise, as explicitly taught in Deuteronomy. The relation of wisdom to the law appears to be stronger in the books outside the wisdom canon.

The prophets, finally, remind us that human wisdom is futile, but true wisdom comes only from God. Comparison between the wisdom models and the secular wise from other nations enhance this point. Those who fear God are always superior. The Psalms recall many wisdom themes in the unique way of beautiful poetry. The New Testament teachings on wisdom will complete our picture.

b. New Testament

Study of the Old Testament wisdom passages has shown that biblical wisdom is rooted in God. With this in mind, it will not surprise that in the New Testament, the main aspect of *sophia* is Jesus the Son of God himself. He is the embodiment of the wisdom of God. (1 Cor 1:24.30) Jesus' many invitations in the gospel parallel the

words of personified wisdom in Prov 8. (Mt 11:27-30; Lk 14:15-24; Jn 6:35)

Moreover, Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3), in his pre-existence took part in creation with his wisdom.²⁷

(Col 1:16) Colossians complements the creation theology of the wisdom literature.²⁸

Extra-biblical Jewish wisdom texts show numerous parallels to Col 1:15-20.²⁹

Interestingly, wisdom that was active in creation is now depicted as being active in redemption, too. Christ is the mediator and the goal of all creation. (cf. Col 1:20)

From his childhood Jesus “was filled with wisdom” and “grew in wisdom.” (Lk 2:40.52) The people of his hometown Nazareth were astonished at his wisdom. (Mk 6:2, cf. Mt 13:54) Jesus said about himself that he is greater and by implication also ‘wiser’ than Solomon. (Mt 12:42; Lk 11:31) In summary, as pinpointed by Goetzmann: “It seems justifiable to speak of a *sophia*-christology.”³⁰

Jesus’ teachings show much of traditional wisdom influence. One key passage of Jesus’ wisdom teachings is the Sermon on the Mount with its emphasis on ethical conduct. (Mt 5:1-7:27) Jesus ends his sermon with a call to put his words into practice.

²⁷ In Col 2:3, ‘wisdom’ and ‘knowledge’ are synonymous, but 1 Cor 12:8 makes a distinction; cf. Gordon H. Clark, “Wisdom in First Corinthians,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15 (Fall 1972): 197f.

²⁸ Cf. chapter 2.b., p.8, n.17.

²⁹ See Jeffrey S. Lamp, “Wisdom in Col 1:15-20: Contribution and Significance,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (March 1998): 50f.

³⁰ J. Goetzmann, *The New Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. „Wisdom“, no. NT1(b).

(Mt 7:24) In harmony with the wisdom literature, only the man of moral conduct who lives and acts with understanding is a truly ‘wise man’.

Other passages, too, show wisdom influence insofar as they lay emphasis on morality. Examples are Romans 12, parts of Hebrews (3:12–19 ; 4:11–13 ; 6:1–12), the social codes in Ephesus (5:22–6:9) and 1 Peter (2:11–3:7), and the ‘vice or virtue’ lists. (cf. Gal 5:19–23; Col 3:5–17) The importance of deeds beyond words is also taught in Jam 1:22–25 and highlighted in 2:26: “Faith without works is dead.” James also shows affinities to biblical wisdom with his strong emphasis on proper speech. (cf. Jam 1:19–26; 2:12; 3:1–12; 4:11; 5:9.12) The book of James to a great extent parallels the wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount.³¹

Among Paul’s writings, the main teaching on wisdom is 1 Corinthians 1–3. Here, terms from the *sophia* word-group are found 25 times.³² Paul contrasts the secular wisdom with spiritual wisdom that is centered on the cross.³³ Again the important theme to note is that true wisdom comes from God alone. Even more, God has turned human wisdom into foolishness. (1 Cor 1:20; 3:19) God’s secret wisdom has been hidden and can only be revealed by the Spirit of God. (1 Cor 2:7.10)

³¹ Virgil V. Porter Jr., “The Sermon on the Mount in the Book of James, Part 1,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (July 2005), 354.

³² J. Goetzmann, *The New Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. „Wisdom“, no. NT.

³³ Jeffrey S. Lamp, “Wisdom in Col 1:15–20,” 200f.; though, his argument against ‘natural theology’ appears to be forced. (cf. Rom 1:20)

The man without the Spirit regards the wisdom of God as foolishness, and so he himself becomes a fool. (cf. Rom 1:22) Paul's teaching reminds us of the prophets who renounced secular wisdom that was detached from faith in God. People like Joseph, Moses and Solomon got their wisdom through the Spirit of God. James 1:5 recalls that wisdom comes from God alone and invites the reader to pray for it, similar to Paul who prayed for the Ephesians to receive the Spirit of wisdom. (Eph 1:17) When Solomon prayed, God listened and gave abundantly.

James even provides a New Testament definition of biblical wisdom in 3:17: "The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." The statement includes many elements treated in the Old Testament wisdom literature. Wisdom is again linked to God, the source of wisdom; it includes the important emphasis on moral conduct ('good fruit'; cf. Mt 7:16f.; 11:19) and exhorts about behaviour in social relationships just as many proverbs do. In particular, James teaches that true wisdom avoids or repairs conflicts.³⁴

Thus New Testament *sophia* builds upon Old Testament *chokmah* and extends its meaning in light of Jesus and the cross. The Bible student should not separate the canon. The art of wisdom cannot be detached from faith in Christ.

³⁴ Stephen E. Fowl, "Wisdom works," *Christian Century* 123 (2006), 18.

4. Conclusion

In light of the studies above, we can reach several conclusions for real life. Above all, the reader is called to value and seek for wisdom since wisdom is supreme. The source of true wisdom is God, and so we should pray and ask him for wisdom. Because biblical wisdom is preserved in the canon, much can be attained by careful study of the Bible and especially of the wisdom canon. There is much confusion between salvation and sanctification in the church today. The student has seen many ministries that are rather unbalanced to either side. Paul wrote that *all* Scripture is useful for teaching, thus the wisdom literature should not be neglected. (2 Tim 3:16)

Apart from the importance of prayer and a balanced study of Scripture, the strong emphasis of *chokmah* on moral conduct cannot be overlooked in this essay. Especially in the western world with its analytic and abstract approach to the Bible that is largely divorced from action, it should be recognized that wisdom and understanding involves commitment and demands practical life decisions for God.³⁵ The appeal is made to both the preacher and his audience. The church needs to grow in *chokmah* for protection from the deadly currents of this world.

³⁵ Gunther Hermann Wittenberg, "Contextual Theology and Resistance," in *Old Testament Theology: Flowering and Future*, ed. Ben C. Ollenburger (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 441.

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