Wisdom Literature and Deuteronomic Theology in the Hebrew Bible

By Lacy LeBlanc

"'Wisdom' is a term that can be used to indicate certain books which deal particularly with (biblical) wisdom, or it can refer to a movement in the ancient world associated with 'teachers' or sages, and it can also suggest a particular understanding of reality which presents some contrasts with other biblical books."1 In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Job, Proverbs, and Qoheleth are considered “wisdom literature”2 because of the frequency which the term ḫkm, the root for wisdom, appears. ḫkm appears 318 times in the Hebrew Bible, and over half of those occurrences appear in the aforementioned “wisdom” books.3 In addition to the frequency of ḫkm, the wisdom books also contain a common terminology, especially the use of “wise/wisdom” in contrast to “foolish/folly,” and similar form and content, including proverbs and instructions.4 Despite the fact that Wisdom was intended to lead people to a deeper understanding of God, it often led to more questions than answers and could be seen as having a detrimental affect on Deuteronomic Theology, which stated that man's actions had a direct correlation with what happened to him in life.

The origins of Hebrew wisdom are unknown. It shows many similarities to Egyptian court wisdom and is sometimes thought to have come from a similar source within Israel.5 However, the earliest form of wisdom was probably based on a collection of folk sayings that had been passed through the generations orally.6 Scholars are also unable to agree whether the term ḫkm in the Hebrew Bible is in II Samuel 13:3, where it refers to a character trait (cleverness) rather than a profession.7 In Ugaritic, the root ḫkm “appears as an attribute, that is, a natural endowment, of the god El.”8 The Wisdom books contain everything from common experience that could be understood by anyone in society to court manners to esoteric discussions on theodicy, which leads most scholars to believe that Wisdom must have evolved from a number of different sources that were compiled over time. The purpose of Wisdom literature was to enable man “to cope with life and to impose a kind of order on the myriad experiences which surround a person.”9 ḫkm is often closely linked to ṣdk (righteous), so there was a tendency to emphasize the qualities of “truthfulness, fidelity, kindness, honesty, [and] control of the appetites” within much of Wisdom literature.10 “There seems to be a general consensus that biblical wisdom connotes a search for ‘order.’ That is to say, the sages held that there was a fundamental order in the world, discernible by experience, and the teachings were designed to bring about conformity with this order that had been determined by God.”11 Hebrew Wisdom literature encouraged people to go out into the world and discover God's order and plan for themselves through experience, rather than merely assuming that they would be carried along by His plan. However, sometimes the result was that no discernible plan was discovered; this is especially evident in the books of Job and Qoheleth. “The common interest in these books is an interest in the problem of human life: not the political problems of the nation of Israel, which, though of gigantic and tragic proportions, are never referred to here, but the problems of ordinary individual citizens: their relations with one another within their own communities in their daily lives, their concern about the present and the future, including the fate of their children and descendants, and about the justice or injustice of their personal destinies.”12 Within the corpus of Hebrew Wisdom literature, there are virtually no mentions of “Israelite” identifying factors (e.g. Sinai covenant, Exodus, etc.), but there is also no separation of faith, experience, or knowledge.13 In Wisdom literature, experiential and spiritual knowledge are given equal worth,14 and especially in Hebrew Wisdom, “[t]he issue is the relationship between divine intervention and human independence. These two factors are always operative in the biblical story. Sometimes one, sometimes the other is emphasized: but both are at work.”15 Although Wisdom does not question the existence or providence of God, it is generally more concerned with the security of existence16 and often provides guidance through the “secular world”17 through thoughtful reflection rather than immediate and decisive action.18 Although man is authorized to go out and investigate and discover the world on his own, he should always refer back to the Commandments to guide him and supply the “missing pieces” that he is unable to acquire on his own.19 Frequently, however, what the Hebrew
sages discovered for themselves was often in direct conflict with the Deuteronomic Theology. Most important for this discussion is Wisdom’s tendency to challenge the status quo as set out by Deuteronomic Theology and the precedent set by Deuteronomistic History. Although the focus of this paper is the effect that Wisdom had on Deuteronomic Theology, one cannot properly discuss it without also discussing Deuteronomistic History. The focus of Deuteronomistic History was the special relationship between God and Israel, how the law confirmed that relationship, and how that relationship affected history. Deuteronomic Theology is the belief that events are directly tied to human actions, and it is often assumed that people reap the results of their actions while they are alive. Good behavior results in a reward, and bad behavior results in punishment. This is in direct contrast to much of wisdom literature, especially the book of Job, where one of the primary concerns is that of theodicy, or why God would allow evil. Wisdom literature questions the correlation between human actions and events. In the Deuteronomist’s view of history and theology, “God was recognisably at work […] continuously meeting the accelerating moral decline with warnings and punishments and finally, when these proved fruitless, with total annihilation.” The very nature and existence of Wisdom, which encouraged searching, questioning, and finding one’s own answers, challenged the previously held view that God was in total control.

Bibliography


The Bible's Wisdom Literature is characterized by tension between an ordered universe guided by God and the reality of life's injustices. The Wisdom books in the Bible, in their probable order of writing, are Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes (also called Qohelet), Ben Sira (also called Sirach or Ecclesiastical), and the Wisdom of Solomon. The first three are included in Jewish and Protestant Bibles. David Penchansky is professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is the author of several books, including Understanding Wisdom Literature (Eerdmans, 2012), Twilight of the Gods: Polytheism in the Hebrew Bible (Westminster John Knox, 2005), and What Rough Beast: Images of God in the Hebrew Bible (Westminster John Knox, 1999). Ask a Scholar. Wisdom literature is a genre of literature common in the ancient Near East. It consists of statements by sages and the wise that offer teachings about divinity and virtue. Although this genre uses techniques of traditional oral storytelling, it was disseminated in written form. The literary genre of mirrors for princes, which has a long history in Islamic and Western Renaissance literature, is a secular cognate of wisdom literature. In Classical Antiquity, the didactic poetry of Hesiod, particularly The Hebrew Bible, also known as Mikra (“what is read”) or TaNaKh, an acronym referring to the traditional Jewish division of the Bible into Torah (Teaching), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings), is the founding document of the people of Israel, describing its origins, history and visions of a just society. The word Bible, from the Greek, ta biblia, is plural and means “books.” This reflects the fact that the Bible is actually a collection of individual books (such as Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, Song of Songs, and many others). The Writings include poetry (Psalms and Lamentations) and wisdom literature (Proverbs and Ecclesiastes), short stories (Esther), and histories (Ezra-Nehemiah and 1-2 Chronicles). Commentaries. Only RUB 220.84/month.