

## TWO HYMNS TO WISDOM PROVERBS 8 AND JOB 28

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*For instruction shall not fail from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor oracle from the prophet (Jer. 18:18).*

Jeremiah directs our attention to the three spiritual forces that shaped character and life in ancient Israel: Priests, whose dual function was to teach Torah and to be the guardians of Israel's sanctities; prophets, who, overpowered by the urging of the Lord, brought His words to the people of Israel; wise men, who imparted wisdom in the practical affairs of individuals.

Wisdom was cultivated in the ancient Near East, notably in Egypt, Sumeria, Babylonia, and other parts of the Fertile Crescent. Israel was no exception. In fact, "Wisdom" underwent some metamorphoses in the development of this genre of creativity, as I shall demonstrate farther on. In the Torah, the two master-builders of the Sanctuary in the wilderness and its appurtenances, Bezalel and Ohaliab, were praised: *I have filled him with the spirit of God in wisdom and under-standing* (Ex. 31:3). Obviously, their wisdom consisted in their creative skill *to work in every kind of craft* (31:5).

In II Samuel, we encounter wisdom in two women. A *wise woman* was engaged by Joab, captain of David's army, who by her diplomatic skill effected a reconciliation between the King and his son Absalom whom he had exiled (II Sam. 14:2). The second episode involving a *wise woman* occurred when Bichri ben-Sheba, rebelling against the King, entrenched himself in Abel-Beth-manoah. Again, it is a wise woman who saved the city from destruction by delivering the head of the rebel into the hands of Joab (20:16).

However, it was reserved for King Solomon to bring Wisdom as a literary activity to a flowering. He is credited with authorship of the Book of Proverbs, with many of its parts carrying the distinct superscription "Proverbs of Solomon." His mastery of wisdom is repeatedly attested to in I Kings:

*The Lord endowed Solomon with wisdom and discernment in great measure, with understanding as vast as the sands on the seashore.*

*Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the Kedemites*

*and than all the wisdom of the Egyptians. He was the wisest of all men: [wiser] than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Chalkol, and Darda the sons of Mahol. His fame spread among all the surrounding nations. He composed 3,000 proverbs, and his songs numbered 1,005 (I Kg. 5:12).*

Proverbs 25:1 has the following curious and telling statement: *Those are also the proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah, King of Judah, copied.* Subsequently, the Talmud elaborated on this statement in a remarkable passage on "Who wrote the Scripture," ascribing to Hezekiah and his men "the writings of Isaiah, the Proverbs, the Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes" (Baba Batra 15:1). It would seem that the term "writing" here signifies collecting, editing, or possibly putting oral tradition into writing.

In any case, it was Solomon who stimulated literary activity, culminating in the popular Book of Proverbs and in the great books of Ecclesiastes and Job. These books represent stages in the development of Wisdom. In fact, Gordis<sup>1</sup> proposed two types of Wisdom: "From the practical-minded teachers of youth emanated the short maxims of the Book of Proverbs," which he calls a repository of "lower Wisdom," "practical in goal and conventional in scope." But there were a few bolder spirits who were intrigued with some fundamental issues "the purpose of life, man's destiny after death, the basis of morality, and the problem of evil." The repository of such speculative issues are Ecclesiastes and Job, which Gordis called "higher Wisdom." It will not come as a surprise that we find hymns to Wisdom in Proverbs and in Job.

#### PROVERBS - CHAPTER 8

The reader is invited to read this entire chapter, as well as the one in Job 28. This Hymn to Wisdom contains 32 verses, divided distinctly into parts: 1-11, 12-21, 22-31, 32-36.

#### PART I: WISDOM PERSONIFIED

A cursory look at the opening verse already reveals the basic thrust of this poem: *It is Wisdom calling, Understanding raising her voice* (v. 1). Wisdom personified appeals to men to heed her advice, which will lead to a noble life of righteousness and truth: *All my words are just, None of them perverse or crooked* (v. 8). Thus she reveals herself as opposed to the corruptor whose

*house is the way to the netherworld* (v. 27). There is no mystery to Wisdom. She is rational and easily accessible to any one who wishes to attain or to be provided by it: *All are straightforward to the intelligent man, And right to those who have attained knowledge* (v. 9).

One will also note two features in this introduction characteristic of the difference between prophetic and wisdom writings. "Wisdom" appeals to men, even all the sons of men, as individuals: *O men, I call you, My cry is to the sons of men* (v. 4). The prophet is primarily concerned with Israel as a collective. Thus: *Rejoice not, O Israel, as other peoples exult, for you have strayed from your God* (Hos. 9:1). Furthermore, Wisdom, sure of herself, makes her promises of a good life if people follow her advice. Here is none of the basic humility of the prophet who, overwhelmed by the Lord's demand, speaks in His name. Listen to the agony of Jeremiah: *You enticed me, and I was enticed; You overpowered me and You prevailed* (Jer. 20:7). Prudence and prophecy went separate ways in their attempt to instill moral conduct. Wisdom appeals to Everyman, prophecy to backsliding Israel. Wisdom speaks in her own name, the prophet in the name of the Lord.

## PART II: WISDOM AND BIBLICAL TRADITION

In Isaiah's vision, the spirit of *hokhmah* [wisdom], *binah* [understanding], the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of *daath* [knowledge], and the fear of the Lord (Isa. 11:2) will rest upon the ideal king or messiah.

Here, as throughout the entire range of the Bible, three terms of intellectual activity: *hokhmah*, *binah*, *daath* are enumerated, without the benefit of defining their precise meaning. Only later, in the talmudic period, was an attempt made to offer some characteristics of the wise man. "Who is a sage? He who foresees the consequences [*ha'ro'eh et hanolad*]" (Tamid 32a). To Ben Zoma, the wise man is the one who learns from all men (Pirkei Avot 4). However, focusing on "wisdom" one can, from the context of its application, determine that it signifies sagacity born of accumulated experience, the gifts and knocks of life. It is a mindset that enables the sage to offer counsel that will lead to a life of happiness. The extent of his experience permits him to apply his wisdom to a wide range of life, which includes proper government: *By me kings reign, and princes decree justice* (Prov. 8:15).

Though seemingly humanistic, the Wisdom of Proverbs and of this hymn is profoundly religious: *The fear of the Lord is to hate evil, Pride and arrogance and the evil way* (v. 13). More than that, there is unexpressed yet pervading faith in the doctrine of Reward and Punishment. God has ordered this world on justice. Since God is just, righteousness must be recompensed, which is the corollary of a universe that is fundamentally ethical. Wisdom, inextricably linked to religion and morality, is, however, quite practical. It does not disdain prosperity. In fact, there is an almost causal relation between wisdom and success: *Riches and honor are with me, Yea, enduring riches and righteousness* (v. 18).

Wisdom leans on another biblical doctrine; that of Free Will. Anyone willing to be guided by her can do so and gain desired benefits: *And those that seek me earnestly shall find me* (v. 17b). With almost touching naïveté, based on unquestioning faith, Wisdom is open to all, rich and poor, the able and the limited, and irrespective of social environment and circumstances: *I love them that love me* (v. 17a). Love of Wisdom is reciprocal and will overcome the hurdles of attaining wisdom.

### PART III: WISDOM, HANDMAIDEN OF THE LORD

In the previous parts, Wisdom proclaimed her call to people to listen to her, her accessibility and ability to be of great benefit to those who heed her counsel. In part three, she reveals herself in the exalted position of the Lord's handmaiden. *The Lord made me at the beginning of His way, The first of His works of old* (v. 22). *I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, Or ever the earth was* (v. 23).

Wisdom reveals herself as God's first creation and subsequently as a cosmic force pervading the universe. In fact, she serves as a blueprint according to which the world was created: *Then I was by Him as a nursling; And I was daily all delight playing always before Him* (v. 30). Wisdom, God's nursling and a delight to man, plays a double role. She is God's tool, a controlling force in the universe: His delight but also a delight to man: *And my delights are with the sons of man* (v. 31b). Through her, man can fully comprehend the laws governing the moral laws.

According to the Midrash, Wisdom is identical with Torah:

The Torah says, "I was the architectural instrument of the Holy One." It is customary that when a human king erects a palace he does not build it in accordance with his own ideas, but according to the ideas of the architect. The architect likewise does not depend only upon his thoughts, but has the necessary parchments and tablets to know how he is to plan the rooms and entrances. So did the Holy One, blessed be He, look into the Torah and created the universe accordingly (Midrash Rabba 15:19).

This view would conform to the basic assumption that a fundamental attribute of the Divine is ethical, thus the universe must be constituted likewise.

The personification of Wisdom as the first in Creation exerted a powerful influence on subsequent Judaic teaching of the Torah – the blueprint of a Creation of a moral universe. And, Bewer insists, "it was the antecedent of the Logos doctrine of the Gospel according to John. In the beginning was the word."<sup>2</sup>

#### JOB – CHAPTER 28

Chapter 28, a magnificent hymn to Wisdom, is deservedly considered, together with the Song of Deborah, as not only one of the greatest poems in the Bible, but indeed in world literature. Preceded by Chapter 27 and then followed by Chapters 29, 30, and 31, this poem does not seem to fit organically within the framework of the soliloquy. Yet, it is in full accord with the major thesis of the book and with the Voice of the Lord from the Whirlwind, in particular.

In my article "The Enigma of Elihu,"<sup>3</sup> I had suggested that it was Elihu (the interlocutor whose speeches are recorded in Chapters 32-36) who was the author of the Book of Job, a hypothesis taken up and elaborated by Weinberg.<sup>4</sup> I now wish to propose an additional hypothesis: Elihu, if indeed he is the author of the Book of Job, must have devoted a great deal of his life to this book, that ranks with the greatest in world literature. One may surmise that he worked on various drafts. Elihu's speeches and this hymn to Wisdom may represent his previous efforts, finding this way into the totality of the book.

## PART I: VERSES 1-11: MAN'S INGENUITY

*There is [ki] a mine [motza] – for silver, And a place [makom] where gold is refined (v. 1). Iron is taken out from the earth, And copper smelted from rock (v. 2).*

Consisting of 28 verses, the chapter can be divided into three parts: Verses 1-11, 12-19, 20-28. Each of the three parts is introduced by a refrain, similar in context but differing in the key words employed: *motza – makom* (v. 1); *timatze – makom* (v. 12); and *m'ayin yavo – makom* (v. 20). The terms *motza-timatze- m'ayin yavo* convey the meaning of "What is the source?" "Where can it be found?"

Verse 1 poses two difficulties. *Motza* is translated by the Old and New JPS as well as by Gordis as "mine." Such a rendering may be correct but does not do justice to the poet's playing on the ambiguity of *motza-timatze*. Tur-Sinai states: "*Motza* may be from *matza*, to find, rather than *yatza*, to come forth."<sup>5</sup> In short, there is a place for a treasure of gold, silver, copper, and sapphire: *Its rocks are a source of sapphires, It contains gold dust too* (v. 6) and, though hidden, man's wisdom ingeniously finds a way to them: *He sets bounds for darkness; To every limit probes man, To rocks in deepest darkness* (v. 3). His wisdom is quite impressive. It can penetrate the kingdom of darkness and illuminate it but it is inadequate to comprehend God's wisdom, as we shall see in the following Parts II and III.

The second difficulty in verse 1 is in the term "*ki*," starting with verse 1 and rendered by the Old JPS as "for there," and ignored altogether by the New JPS. However, Amos Chacham in his commentary to the Book of Job<sup>6</sup> finds a special significance to *ki*. He maintains that it implies contrasts as will be developed in the three parts of the hymn between the "wisdom" of man and "Divine wisdom."

In Part I we discover a dimension of wisdom entirely different from that in Proverbs. This hymn is not concerned with the kind of practical wisdom adequate to conduct our lives, but with one that searches, explores, conquers, hearkening back to the original Divine blessing bestowed on man: *fill the earth and master it* (Gen. 1:28). To this end, man has been endowed with special *hokhmah* to fulfill this blessing.

In his ingenuity to reach his goal: *He carves out channels through rock* (v. 10a) . . . and *He dams up the sources of the streams* . . . (v. 11a).

On the way to Eilat, I pass Timnah, an ancient site of copper mines. Whenever I pass Timnah I am overcome by wonder. How did the ancients discover Timnah and how did they learn to extract copper from the rocks?

PART II: VERSES 12-19: IN SEARCH OF WISDOM

*But where can wisdom be found [timatze], Where is the place [makom] of understanding? (v. 12).*

Following Chacham's significant interpretation of *ki*, Part II will display contrasts with Part I, already discernible in the refrains. While silver has a place, where can wisdom be found? *The deep says 'It is not in me,' The sea says 'I do not have it'* (v. 14). In his search for treasures *to every limit probes man* (v. 3b) he sets values on gold and silver but to wisdom *no man can set value on it* (v. 13) and it *cannot be bartered or sold* (v. 15).

Though this hymn does not define God's wisdom, it may be rather easily deduced from the context of the Book of Job. It consists of the great wonders of Creation and a moral universe which includes suffering, not as wages of sin, but as an integral part of its Divine management. Both are impenetrable and hidden from man. *It cannot be found in the land of the living* (v. 13b) and thus the gulf between man's wisdom and God's wisdom is unbridgeable.

PART III: VERSES 20-28

*But whence does wisdom come? Who is the source of understanding? (v. 20).*

Though introduced by the usual refrain, Part III is a continuation of Part II, accentuating the contrasts contained therein. What was merely implicit in Part II now turns explicit. Divine wisdom is incomprehensible to mere man: *It is hidden from the eyes of the living*. It is concealed to him from all the spheres of nature: From the land (v. 13), from the sea (v. 14), and from the fowl of the heavens (21b). Playing with words, the poet adds some subtle contrasts. While Divine wisdom cannot be found *in the land of the living*, . . . *Abaddon and Death say, 'we only have a report of it'* (v. 22). And while hidden from the eyes of man *He sees to the end of the earth* (v. 27).

Gone is the optimism of vv. 30 and 31 in Proverb's Hymn to Wisdom in which *hokhmah* is accessible to those who earnestly search for it, and is a delight to God and man. For Job, only *God understands the way to it* (v. 23); thus, setting a seal on the gulf between the *hokhmah* of man and God.

*When He fixed the weight of the wind, Set the measure for the waters (v. 25). When He made a rule for the rain, And a course for the thunderstorm (v. 26).* These two verses anticipate the great speeches of the Lord from the tempest in Chapters 38-41. God's questions: *Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?* (38:4) and *Would you impugn My justice? Would you condemn Me that you may be right?* (40:8) led to Job's confession: *'Indeed, I spoke without understanding, or things beyond me which I did not know'* (42:3). While satisfying Job's quest of theodicy, justification of a God of Justice in the face of the existence of evil and undeserved suffering, neither the quotations raised by God nor Job's confession seem to be complete.

In the memorial for the Ten Martyrs in the Yom Kippur liturgy, we have a most dramatic presentation of man's incomprehension of God's justice.

When Rabbi Yishmael is tortured to death, the angels of Heaven call in anguish: 'Is this the Torah and this is its reward?' Whereupon a voice replied, "If I hear another sound uttered, I will turn the world to water; I will devastate both heaven and earth. This is My decree. Accept it, all of you who love the Torah that preceded creation by two thousand years."

It is precisely the final verse of our Hymn which provides an answer to man's agonizing wish to comprehend God's ways: *He said to man: Reverence [yirath] of the Lord is wisdom, to shun evil is understanding (v. 28).*<sup>7</sup>

This answer to the ultimate question is almost identical to that in Proverbs 8:13: *The fear of the Lord is to hate evil* followed by *The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord* (Prov. 9:10). However, the way to this conclusion is different for Proverbs and for Job. For Proverbs this is the direct outcome of the hallowed doctrine of Reward and Punishment. For Job it is the result of resignation, based on skepticism of this doctrine on one side, and the inability to comprehend God's ways and wisdom on the other side.

#### NOTES

1. Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) p. 42.
2. Julius A. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950) p. 316.
3. Shimon Bakon, "The Enigma of Elihu," *Dor le Dor* 1984 (12) pp. 217-228.
4. J. Weinberg, "Was Elihu, the son of Barachel, the author of the book of Job?" *Transeuphrat* 1998 (16) pp. 149-166; J. Weinberg, "Authorship and author in the Ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible," *Hebrew Studies* 2003 (44) pp. 157-169.

5. N.H. Tur-Sinai, *The Book of Job, A New Commentary* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer Ltd., 1967) p. 395.
6. Amos Chacham, *Sefer Iyov* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1970).
7. Both the Old JPS and New JPS translate *yirat Adonai* as "fear of the Lord." However, "reverence of the Lord" seems preferable. It is not fear but reverence of an inscrutable God and His mighty deeds that prompts Job's final admissions in 28:28 and 42:3. See also the paper by Shubert Spero in *Daf Shavui*, Bar Ilan University, Number 715.