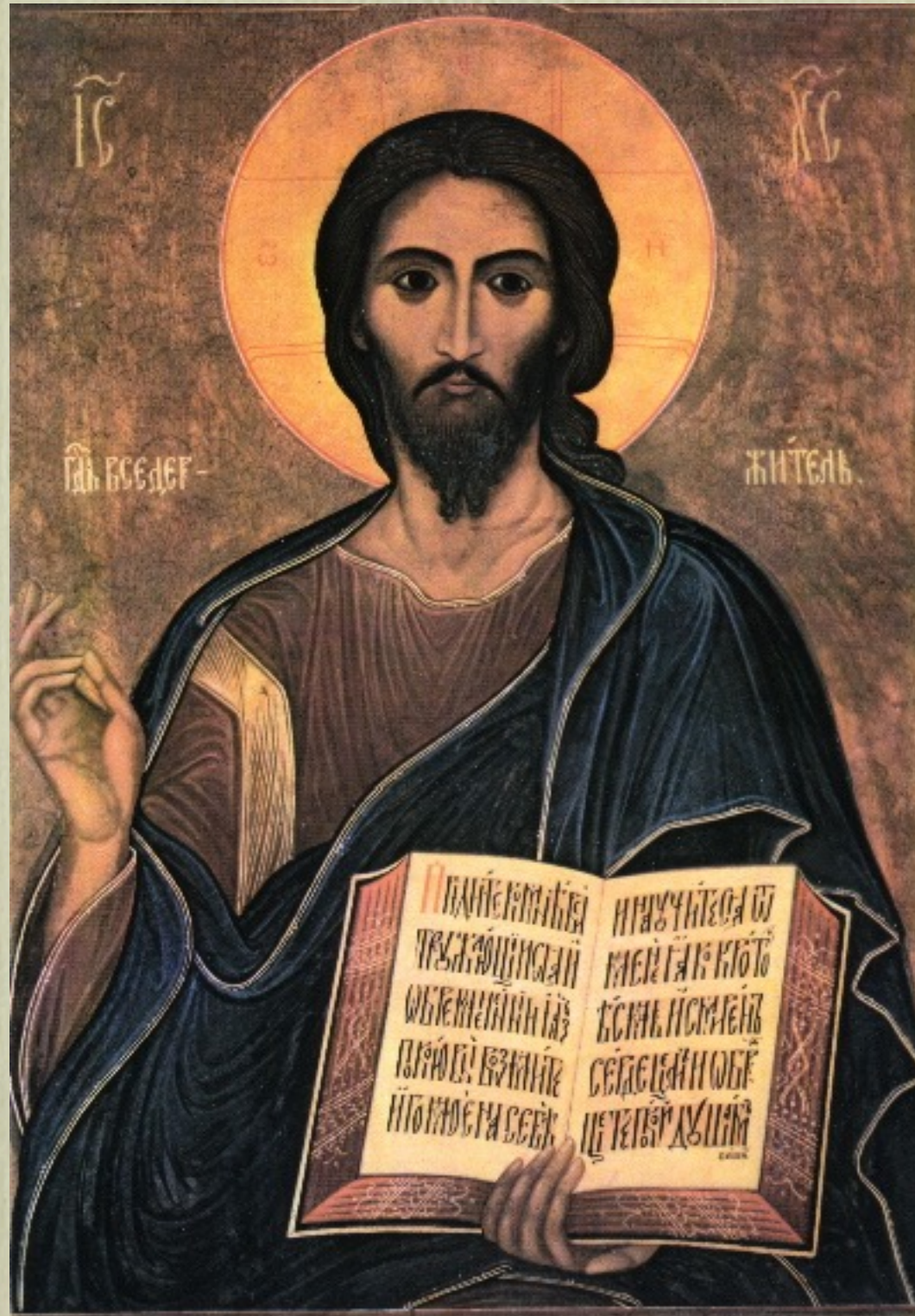


## 04. Wisdom in Ancient Israel





A number of the Writings in the Hebrew Bible are concerned with Wisdom

Some Psalms

5th century BC: Song of Songs, Job

4th century BC: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes

And from the Greek Bible (Septuagint):

Sirach, Baruch, Wisdom (of Solomon)



The people of Ancient Israel, like the people of the surrounding nations (indeed, like people everywhere) looked up to men and women who were perceived as being wise.

We all want to get on in the world, but we have to learn how best to respond to the situations in which we find ourselves.

Life is complex and we know from experience that some decisions we make lead to outcomes that work for us and for our neighbours; other decisions lead to consequences that are unpleasant, and worse.



A farmer needs to be able to read the seasons and to manage unseasonable weather, drought, grasshopper plague, and much besides. Some things are completely beyond our control and we just have to accept and make the best of misfortune. But in ordinary circumstances managing a farm has to be learned, so we seek the advice of an experienced and wise farmer.

It is the same for raising a family and managing a home. Husbands and wives seek advice, then as now, and they seek out a wise person to direct them along a path that works. Parenting, too, is a skill that can be learned.

Similarly with getting on with one's neighbours and contributing to the community of the village rather than being a neutral or destructive presence.



It is here that we should look for the origin of many of the wise sayings found in the Older Testament. These sayings are, for the most part, the fruit of experience. They became part of the oral tradition.

They had a lesson for everyone, but were used especially to prepare the young to help them avoid falling into the many pitfalls that life presents, by instructing them how to live in such a way as to find personal fulfilment, as well as to contribute to the welfare of the community.

There are hundreds of memorable one-liners in the oldest sections of one of the oldest book of Israelite wisdom, the Book of Proverbs (see Proverbs 10:1 - 22:16 and 25:1 - 29:27).



Of course, the Wisdom Books are the product of literary activity. We should not be surprised to find that brief and memorable one-liners from the oral tradition are sometimes expanded by scribes eager to direct the student's attention to consider a specific application of the wisdom contained in the saying or proverb. They did this by adding one or two sentences to motivate learning and to draw out consequences of heeding or disregarding the lesson.



As the tribes of Israel moved beyond subsistence farming, formed a state and built up the complex systems needed to manage a state and to relate to surrounding states in a way that worked to their own advantage, many skills had to be acquired. Statesmen, military commanders, and public servants, can make foolish decisions. They can make wise decisions. Israel needed people who had successfully applied their intelligence to learn from their experience how best to make decisions that benefited the nation.



Many of the 'wise sayings' in the various books of Israelite wisdom focus on teaching keen young men who were aspiring to a career in government or administration, and many of these sayings were influenced by the experience of cultures that were much older than Israel, cultures such as Assyria and Babylonia, but especially Egypt.



So far we have been focusing on sayings and instructions that are based on experience, whether it be the ancient experience of everyday life the origins of which are lost in the mists of time, or more recent experience that came with the development of the city-state and interaction with foreign nations.

Much of the material found in the books of Israelite wisdom has its basis in these experiences.

Much of it, however, is based on faith in God and on the religious traditions of Israel. The wisdom teachers of Israel are integrating wisdom with religious commitment.



In Egyptian wisdom literature the stability and continuity of the state relies on respect for divinely established order.

In Israel wisdom is seen as a gift of YHWH.

The aim of wisdom is to live a good, productive life. The people of ancient Israel knew that such a life has its source in God, the Creator, and has as its goal a life of communion with God, a communion experienced in nature, in communal living whether in the country or the city, and in the events of daily life.



What sets the teachers of wisdom apart from the priests and prophets is that their primary focus is not the Torah, or obedience to divine inspiration, but shrewd observation of life experience.

Day to day running of a farm or managing a family cannot wait for prophetic revelation or priestly instruction. People need to apply their mind honestly to what is happening in their lives and behave as mindfully as they can, learning from the wise. God has given us intelligence so that we will think things through. Decisions should, to use a modern term, be evidence based.

The teachers of wisdom respected the Torah (and at times relied on it), but this respect could not substitute for mindful living. A person who is faithful to the Torah but who stumbles from one foolish decision to another is a prisoner of circumstances.



Wisdom liberates. It opens a person up to possibilities of living well. A wise king, a wise statesman, a wise administrator of justice, a wise public servant, a wise farmer, a wise artisan, a wise trader, a wise grandmother, a wise teacher, are blessings from God.

But wisdom does not come automatically or cheaply. It is the fruit of living a thoughtful, intelligent life in the real world. The aim of the books of Israelite wisdom is to help educate people in how to do this, by sharing traditional and current wisdom. The instructions and most of the wise sayings state how a person is to behave in his personal life or public career.

They aim to teach, but more importantly to get people to think about their lives. Traditions, however wise, cannot be inflexible. New situations require new thinking and new decisions.



The Introduction to the Book of Proverbs opens with the words: ‘The proverbs of **Solomon**, son of David, king of Israel’(1:1). In the Book of Kings we read: ‘Solomon composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five’(1Kings 4:32).

‘God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore’(1Kings 4:29).

‘King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom’(1Kings 10:23).

We find this tradition continued in the Newer Testament.

‘The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!’(Matthew 12:42).



In the Hebrew Bible, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes are also attributed to Solomon, as is the 'Wisdom of Solomon' in the Septuagint (the Greek Older Testament). In each case the material is linked to the man whom tradition saw as the wisest of men. The editors are claiming that these books offer authoritative wisdom.



As is clear in Ecclesiastes, and in Job, what was considered wise behaviour in earlier times was judged to be inadequate in the changed circumstances of post-exilic Judah. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the end of the monarchy, called much of traditional wisdom into question.

Traditional 'wisdom' that saw God as rewarding the good with success and punishing the rebellious could not satisfy people's questions. Prosperity and success could no longer be thought of as necessarily indicating divine blessing. A new understanding was required.

Exilic and post-exilic wisdom literature stresses the fact that we cannot comprehend God. We must apply our minds as honestly as we can, but ultimately wisdom shares in the mysterious transcendence of God.

We must trust. We must also live a 'righteous' life.



The English word ‘righteous’ picks up an important nuance.

It derives from two words: ‘right’ and ‘wise’.

To be righteous (rightwise) is to be wise as to what is right: right with God primarily, and also right with the world.

As Dermot Cox writes in his *Proverbs* (Michael Glazier, 1982, page 60):

“‘Wisdom’ is clearly an art to be learned by all who are caught up in daily affairs – the art of choosing the right way, of knowing how to distinguish, in each situation of life, what is right, what is conducive to the good.’



While wisdom is essentially practical, and evidence based, its goal is for the individual and the community to enjoy ‘peace’(*šālōm*):  
a fullness of life that can come only as a gift from God.

In the important enterprise that is the seeking of wisdom, trust is founded on the belief that God ‘knows the way of the righteous’(Psalm 1) – a knowing that implies intimate communion.

That is why ‘**fear of YHWH**’ is seen as the foundation for wisdom (see Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, 15:33). Perhaps the ‘of’ is better translated ‘from’. The ‘fear’ is seen as a gift from God. In the words of Isaiah (11:2-3):

‘The spirit of YHWH will rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the **fear of YHWH**.  
His delight will be in the **fear of YHWH**.



The Psalmist states:

‘The **fear of YHWH** is the beginning of wisdom’(Psalm 111:10).

‘Happy are those who **fear YHWH**, who greatly delight in his commandments’(Psalm 112:1).

‘Happy is everyone who **fears YHWH**, who walks in his ways.

You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands;  
you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;  
your children will be like olive shoots around your table.

Thus shall the man be blessed who **fears YHWH**’(Psalm 128:1-4).

Job declares: ‘Truly, the **fear of YHWH**, that is wisdom;  
and to depart from evil is understanding’(Job 28:28).



In the Newer Testament, as a response to God as revealed in Jesus, John can write: ‘There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love’(1John 4:18).

Prior to Jesus it is understandable that God was at times seen as an object of fear. The expression ‘fear of YHWH’, however, focuses more radically on a gift received from God, the source of all wisdom: a sense of the sacred at the heart of the world, a sense that inspires awe and wonder and an openness to mystery. It is this reverence that expands our experience of the every day. Relying on God, and putting our trust in God, we have the courage to explore experience, knowing that, however easy or hard our circumstances may be, God, who has chosen us as his own, is at the heart of the world that God transcends.



‘Wisdom’ is at times personified – something that appears to be unique to Israel (Wisdom 8:22-36):

‘YHWH created me at the beginning of his work ...  
Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth ...  
When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep ...  
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
then I was beside him, like a master worker;  
and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,  
rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.



My children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways.  
Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it.  
Happy is the one who listens to me,  
watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.  
For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from YHWH.  
Those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.”



To quote Cox again (page 74): ‘Wisdom is a channel by which God can reach out to humanity, and draw humanity to himself, led by the voice of creation and its inherent mystery.’

We cannot comprehend God, and we cannot comprehend life. God appeals to us through ‘Wisdom’ to live reflective lives. In this way we will play our part in ordering the world for God and in building communities that will bring about the reign of God in this world.



In his “Jesus: an historical approximation”(Convivium Press, 2015)  
José A Pagola writes (page 296:

‘Jesus, the poet of God’s mercy must have found this psalm of thanksgiving especially meaningful:

‘The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and has compassion over all that he has made. All your works will give thanks to you, O Lord’(Psalm 145:8-10).



‘The prophet who unconditionally accepted sinners must have been encouraged by this psalm:

“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins ... As a Father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who revere him”(Psalm 103:8-10, 13).



‘The defender of the poor and humiliated must have sung these words with special joy:

“O Lord, who is like you? You deliver the weak from those too strong for them, the weak and needy from those who despoil them”(Psalm 35:10).

He must have identified passionately with this prayer for the poor:

“Do not forget the life of the poor forever. Have regard for your covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the haunts of violence. Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame. Let the poor and needy praise your name”(Psalm 74:19-21).



‘And this psalm, which seems to anticipate Jesus’ beatitudes, must have echoed in his soul:

“Happy are those whose hope is in the Lord their God ... who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry”(Psalm 146:5-7).

‘It was in this deeply religious environment that Jesus nourished his experience of God.’



The Gospel-writers quote from the psalms to help convey Jesus' teaching

‘This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world”(Matthew 13:35; Psalm 78:2).

‘The Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will “repay everyone for what has been done”(Matthew 16:27; Psalm 62:12).



Quoting Psalm 8:2

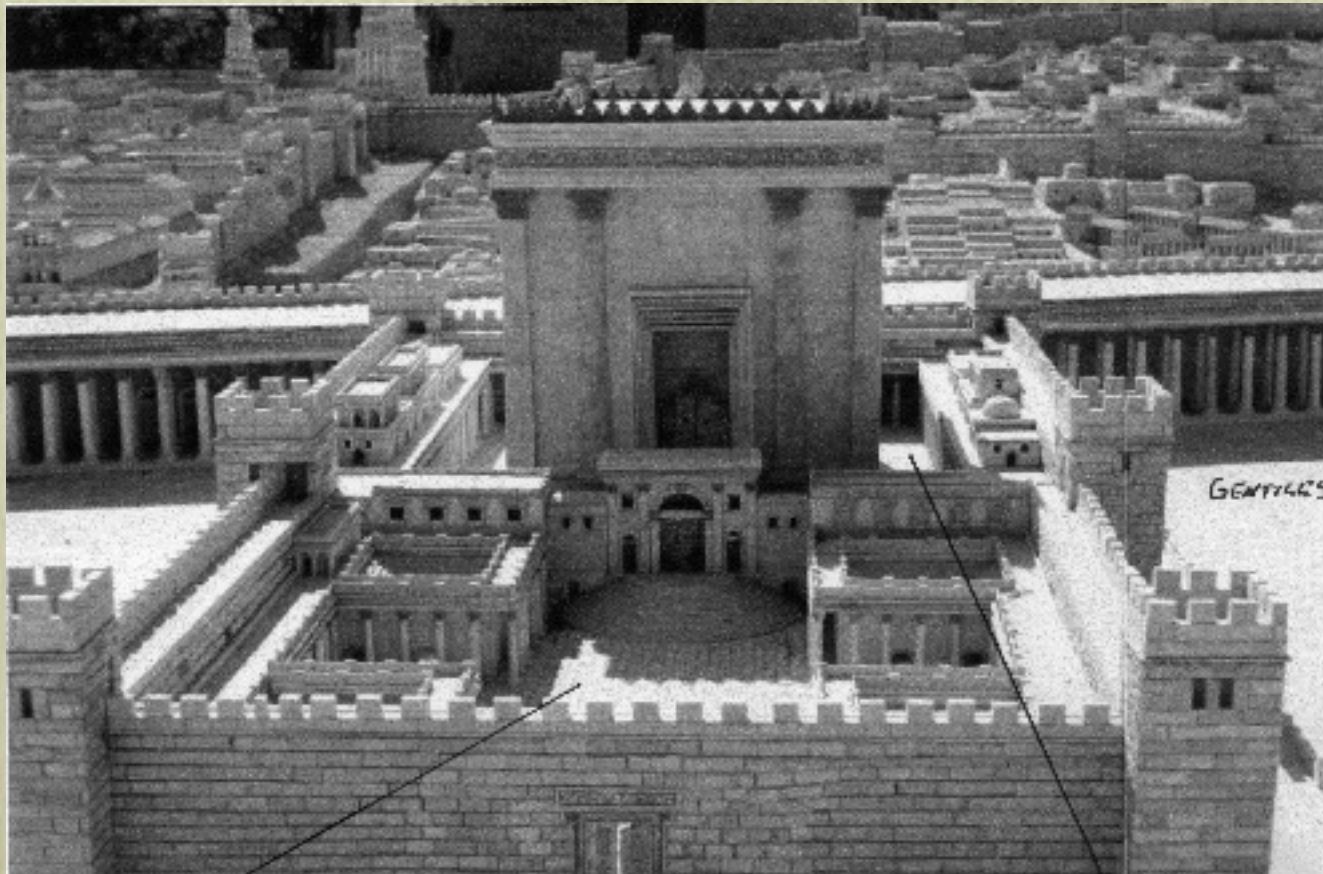
Jesus said to them, “Have you never read,  
‘Out of the mouths of babies and infants  
you have prepared praise for yourself?’” (Matthew 21:16).





## Quoting Psalm 118:22-23

‘Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures:  
‘The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;  
this was the Lord’s doing,  
and it is amazing in our eyes’?(Matthew 21:42).





Jesus challenging their idea of the Messiah:

‘David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared,  
‘The Lord said to my Lord,  
“Sit at my right hand,  
until I put your enemies under your feet’(Mark 12:36; Psalm 110:1).

Jesus responds to those who accuse him of making himself equal to God

‘Jesus answered, “Is it not written in your law,  
‘I said, you are gods’?(John 10:34; Psalm 82:6).



Jesus speaks of those who have hated him and his Father:

It was to fulfill the word that is written in their law,

‘They hated me without a cause’(John 15:25; Psalm 69:4)



## Quoting Psalm 78:24

‘Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written,  
‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’(John 6:31).





## Quoting Psalm 41:9

‘I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen.

But it is to fulfill the scripture,

‘The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me’(John 13:18).





Quoting the opening words of Psalm 22.

‘It was the middle of the afternoon when Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”(Matthew 27:46).





Quoting Psalm 31:5.

‘Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said,  
“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”  
Having said this, he breathed his last’(Luke 23:46).

