

The Nature of Wisdom and Its Practitioners

Who were the Hebrew sages and what did they do? This is a simple enough question, but it is not easy to answer. Unlike the prophets and priests, the category of sages does not designate a homogenous group of people with clearly defined boundaries. In fact, there were many types of sages who served in ancient Israel. Part of the problem is that the feature that defines and unites this group, wisdom, is an ability shared by the masses at large. And so there is wisdom of a very general sort but also a technical version of it. In other words, all Israelites could develop wisdom and be wise, but only certain segments of Israelite society could rightly be called sages, and these of various categories.

Of course, Israelite priests were not all of the same category. The Aaronide or Zadokite priests came to dominate the Levites, who did the menial tasks, like cleaning up after a sacrifice. The Levites became essentially second-class priests. But, generally, one could have probably more easily identified a priest than a sage: by their clothing, their locale, and their vocational skills. Priests are usually defined as

cultic or ritual experts. Israelite priests conducted important rituals either at local holy shrines or at the Temple in Jerusalem. They were experts in dealing with the problem of sin and impurity: how to remove it through sacrifices, rites, and observing various laws. They were also experts at soliciting divine knowledge through the mysterious Urim and Thummim, a priestly casting of lots—a form of divination (e.g., 1 Sam. 28:6). Priests were often also teachers, especially the Levites, and served as judges (Neh. 8:7–8).

Israelite prophets were also not without their distinctions. Prophets specialized as mediums who communicated God's will to the people. There were professional court prophets like Nathan and Isaiah, and there were rustic, amateur prophets like Amos. There may have been even what scholars call cultic prophets, who worked at holy shrines or served at the Temple, perhaps even involved with musical production at these sites—e.g., Habakkuk 3 constitutes a hymn that contains musical notations! Prophets sometimes distinguished themselves by their dress (Elijah's hairy mantle [2 Kgs. 1:8]) and bizarre behavior (Isaiah walked around naked for three years [Isa. 20:2–3]).

Identifying the Israelite sages would have been a more difficult endeavor. They received no divine calling like the prophets, neither did they customarily employ any divinatory techniques to discern God's will, as did the priests (except for mantic sages, which will be discussed later). They were not cultic specialists or musicians, nor usually conduits through whom God spoke directly. Their extraordinary skill resided elsewhere: in their heads. Wisdom was the skill or ability they excelled in. So, in what did wisdom consist? What is it exactly?

Defining Wisdom

Before we talk about the special types of wisdom the various sages employed, we must focus on Israelite wisdom in the most general sense. Basically, wisdom is an ability, gift, or skill. In a nutshell it is intelligence, especially high cognitive ability. Of course, from a biological perspective, intelligence is an important adaptive skill and ability that all species share. But humans are exceptional in this category. While we do not have the largest brains, we have the largest ones among primates and our brains have an extraordinary number of neurons. Humans may not be “red in tooth and claw,” but we do have these wonderful brains that have enabled our species to prevail and become dominant on the earth. No wonder we call ourselves *homo sapiens*, “intelligent being.” It is appropriate that the word *sapiens* is the Latin word that means “wise” and the word from which our word “sage” comes. Our high intelligence gives us an advantage over other species, but, also, within our own species, intelligence can be a critical ability that enables us as individuals or groups to survive or become dominant.

Types of Wisdom

Amateur Wisdom

The Hebrew word for “wisdom” is *chokmah* and the adjective “wise” is *chakam*. It denotes what might be called amateur or common, non-technical wisdom translated as “cleverness” or “cunning.” A “wise” woman saves her city by persuading Joab, David’s military commander, to not destroy it (2 Sam. 20:15–22). Like Spock in Star Trek, she convinces Joab that it is better or more logical to slay the one rather than the many of her city. It would be pointless to kill

so many innocent people. She then throws the head of the culprit (Sheba) Joab wants over the wall of the city, and he withdraws.

Sidebar 1: Hebrew Transliteration

Like many other ancient alphabetic Semitic languages (Ugaritic, Aramaic, etc.), written Hebrew did not originally include vowels. Vowel indicators, called vowel points, were not added to Hebrew until the Middle Ages by the rabbis. The rabbis had been pronouncing the Hebrew for centuries without these markings under the consonants. The lack of vowel points is partly due to the fact that no Hebrew words began with vowels, unlike the ancient Greek language, which needed vowels at the beginning of some of its words, such as its negative particle *ou*. The Israelite scribes simply memorized the vowel sounds and eventually used certain consonants to function doubly as consonants and vowels, like the *waw*, pronounced *o* as a vowel but the *vee* sound as a consonant. The root of a Hebrew word refers to the three identifying consonants that formed most Hebrew words, without the vowels. It is also the simplest form of the word. From this root, all the nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs can be formed, by adding prefixes and suffixes to the root. For example, the word for “wise” is *ch + k + m*, with only the consonants, but when you add the vowels it becomes *chakam*. If you turn it into a noun, “wisdom,” it becomes *chokmah = ch + k + m + h*, plus the vowels. I use the simplest form of Hebrew translation in this book, without indicating the various technical nuances of word formation and sound.

Abigail demonstrates this kind of wisdom when she uses her wits to save her family from slaughter by David, whom her husband Nabal, nickname meaning “fool,” had insulted (1 Sam. 25). She quickly meets David and provides him and his men with gifts, is very deferential, and convinces him that what he is about to do is very unjust. At the beginning of the story, she is described as *tovah sekel*—literally “good of insight” (v. 3). And at the end, David pronounces, “Blessed is your discretion!” (*ta’am*)¹ (v. 33), because she had kept him from shedding innocent blood.

Divine Wisdom

A more specialized but fundamental form is divine wisdom because the source of wisdom ultimately goes back to the deities. The gods of the ancient Near East often claimed to be wise in addition to other characteristics like powerful, just, immortal, and majestic. The head of the Canaanite pantheon, El, is called “wise” and “old” (Müller 1980, 366), characteristics usually found together. When the other Canaanite gods are praised, El is usually the comparison. In Mesopotamia, the god Enki/Ea is the god of wisdom and magic who counsels the other gods.² Marduk, the great god of the Babylonians, is also described as very wise. Similarly, in Egypt, the god of wisdom is Thoth, who is depicted with the head of an ibis or baboon, and is also the god of the scribes. Thoth is usually depicted holding a wand in one hand, which represents power, and an ankh symbol in the other, which represents life. Thoth was married to Maat, whose headdress held a feather, so light it would not cause the scales of judgment to tilt

1. Translations of the Hebrew Scriptures are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

2. Bob Becking (1996, 34–54) argues that Yahweh assumes the role of Ea in 2 Kings 4:31–37 by exorcizing the Shunemite woman’s son at the bequest of Elisha.

falsely. Maat thus represented justice, order, balance, and truth. She is the great theme of the Egyptian wisdom literature.



Illustration 2. Ea.

The gods in fact were often thought to have brought wisdom to humans, much like Prometheus with his gift of fire. In Mesopotamian lore, Ea was responsible for the creation of humans, which he sired. Ea also imparted his wisdom to seven divine sages, who in turn passed on knowledge and culture to humans before the flood. These

were followed by four semi-divine sages, some of them kings, until finally Mesopotamian scribal teachers transmitted this knowledge to their students. To get around the obvious problem of transmitting culture and knowledge from before the flood to after it, one version of the Epic of Gilgamesh has the Babylonian “Noah,” Utnapishtim, a.k.a. Atrahsis (= “extremely wise”), bury the instructions for human culture in Sippar, where they could be found after the flood. A Babylonian text, “The Instructions of Shuruppak,” claims to be part of that instruction. The genealogy of Cain (Gen. 4:17-24) partly parallels these explanations. Cain’s descendants are the bearers of culture and civilization (city-builders, tent-dwellers, musicians, and smiths) to the antediluvian world. And the personification of wisdom, Woman Wisdom, created before the creation of the world, in Proverbs 8 functions in the same way, as a bearer of culture. In fact, one could call her the Hebrew Prometheus!

Of course, the Israelites also claimed that the Lord was very wise: “With him are wisdom and strength; he has advice and discernment” (Job 12:13). Compare the doxology in Rev. 7:12: “Amen! Blessing and glory and *wisdom* and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen” (NRSV). That there are seven attributes reinforces the perfection of the deity. In Isaiah 40, there is a comparison of God with the idols and gods of the nations that combines many of these elements: his power, might, glory, and his superior knowledge (vv. 10-31).



Illustration 3. Thoth

THE NATURE OF WISDOM AND ITS PRACTITIONERS

Figure 1: Timeline of the Ancient Near East		
Mesopotamia and Palestine	Egypt	Israel
Early Bronze Age or EBA (3500–2100 B.C.E.)	Old Kingdom (2650–2135 B.C.E.)	
Middle Bronze Age or MBA (2100–1550 B.C.E.)	First Intermediate Period (2135–2040 B.C.E.)	
	Middle Kingdom (2040–1650 B.C.E.)	
	Second Intermediate Period (1650–1550 B.C.E.)	
Late Bronze Age or LBA (1550–1200 B.C.E.)	New Kingdom (1550–1080 B.C.E.)	
		Iron Age I (1200–1000 B.C.E.)
		Iron Age II (1000–587 B.C.E.)
		Neo-Babylonian Period (587–539 B.C.E.)
		Persian Period (539–332 B.C.E.)
		Ptolemaic Period (332–198 B.C.E.)
		Seleucid Period (198–140 B.C.E.)
		Hasmonean Dynasty (140–37 B.C.E.)



Illustration 4. Maat

Though the book Proverbs assumes that one can study the many aphorisms in the book and attain wisdom through hard work and effort (Prov. 1:2-6, 8, 23-25), it simultaneously depicts God as the ultimate source of wisdom:

For the Lord gives wisdom,
from his mouth is knowledge and understanding.
And he will store up for the upright success,
and protection for those who walk in integrity (Prov. 2:6-7).

For wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul (Prov. 2:10).

All wisdom ultimately goes back to him, and, thus, has divine origins. This fits with the depiction of Woman Wisdom as the source of all wisdom, who represents God (Prov. 8:22-31). Thus, the whole world is saturated with wisdom and reflects its designs and orderliness.

Royal Wisdom

As the gods, so go the kings. They claimed to have great wisdom in addition to their power, justice, and majesty. Of course, Solomon humbly asks for wisdom to govern the Israelites as their king instead of wealth, honor, long life, and power over his enemies (1 Kgs. 3). Because of this, God gives Solomon all of them. A king could use his power alone (his army) to force his people to submit, but this is much less effective and more costly than for him to be wise and beneficent to them as well. The people are more likely to follow the king who is persuasive and wise than one who rules with an iron fist alone. This is what Max Weber, a father of sociology, called “legitimacy,” that a ruler desires those he rules to view it as legitimate (1978, 31; see Swedberg 2005, 147-49). Yet Solomon’s wisdom went beyond legal and political astuteness. He is depicted as a true polymath and having great literary abilities, such as the skill to compose 3000 proverbs and 1005 songs (1 Kgs. 5:9-12), as well as having encyclopedic knowledge (v. 13), similar to the Egyptian onomastica, or catalogs of things according to their kind.

Sidebar 2: Egyptian Onomastica

The Egyptian onomastica were catalogs of things arranged according to their kind. The “Onomastica of Amenoep” begins: “Beginning of the teaching for clearing the mind, for instruction of the ignorant and for learning all things that exist: what Ptah created, what Thoth copied down, heaven with its affairs, earth and what is in it, what the mountains belch forth, what is watered by the flood, all things upon which Re has

shone, all that is grown on the back of earth, excogitated by the scribe of the sacred books in the House of Life, Amenope, son of Amenope.” The list begins: “[S]ky, sun, moon, star, Orion, the Great Bear, . . . storm, tempest, dawn, darkness, light, shadow, sunlight, rays of the sun, storm-cloud, dew, snow, rainstorm . . .” Here is another section of the list: “[G]od, goddess, male spirit, female spirit, king, queen, king’s wife, king’s mother, king’s child, crown-prince, vizier, sole friend, eldest king’s son, great overseer of the army, the courtiers . . .” (Gardiner 1947, 2, 5-6, 13-21).

Azitawadda, king of Danuna, near Ugarit, Syria (720 B.C.E.), boasts that the vassal kings he controlled chose him because of his righteousness, wisdom, and graciousness (Müller 1980, 366). In ancient Egypt, the tomb autobiographies of Pharaohs and noblemen often include boastings of being wise. Also, the Egyptian official Sinuhe (twentieth century B.C.E.) describes the new king as “lord of wisdom” (Müller 1980, 369). Thutmose III (fifteenth century B.C.E.) calls himself “shrewd in wisdom.” The Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (seventh century B.C.E.) states that he comprehends the wisdom of Nabû, god of the scribes (Sweet 1990, 55).

Professional or Technical Wisdom

There is also a technical type of wisdom that involves high skill or expertise in some trade or field of study or practice. Hiram of Tyre was hired by Solomon to do the bronze work on the Temple because of his unusual expertise in the artisan craft (1 Kgs. 7:13-45). A woman

from Tekoa is described as “wise” (2 Sam. 14:2), and, because of her superb theatrical talents, she convinced David to allow his son Absalom to return from exile. Solomon is famous for demonstrating his judicial “wisdom” by determining the real mother of the living baby in the story of the two prostitutes (1 Kgs. 3). This event immediately follows his reception of wisdom from God in a dream (1 Kgs. 3:12). A person who is described as “knowledgeable about (painful) worms” found on a clay tablet from Uruk in Babylonia (fourth-second centuries B.C.E.) is probably a dentist (Müller 1980, 366-67).

Mantic Wisdom and Magic

In Akkadian, the language of the Babylonians, “wisdom” is often used to describe a special type of technical expertise: the art of divination. Daniel purportedly was trained as a mantic sage in Babylonia. The Babylonian king took from the Jewish exiles “young men among whom there was no blemish and handsome and wise concerning all wisdom (*chokmah*) and knowledgeable and intelligent and who were able to stand in the king’s court and in order to teach them the literature and language of the Babylonians” (Dan. 1:4). This literature would have been the vast omen literature studied by diviners, those who observed the stars and other signs like the entrails of animals to determine what the future held. Though Daniel was trained broadly in this lore, his expertise was in the interpretation of dreams (oneiromancy), which ability he received from God (Dan. 2:28). Joseph was an expert in this particular type of divination as well. Both Daniel and Joseph outdo their pagan colleagues and competitors. In Isa. 44:24-28, God contrasts his power and the authenticity of his prophets with Babylon and its mediums; he is a God “who frustrates the omens of oracle priests, and makes a mockery of diviners; who

turns back the wise, and makes their knowledge foolishness.” Again, in Isa. 47:10 there is a polemic against Babylon and its diviners, astrologers, charmers, and sorcerers.

Related to mantic wisdom is magical wisdom. Psalm 58:5 refers to the “cunning enchanter” or snake charmer (see Müller 1980, 378). More famously, Pharaoh summons the “wise men and the sorcerers” to turn their rods into serpents as Aaron did (Exod. 7:11). Magic was an important component of Egyptian and Mesopotamian religion and politics. It was less so in Israel, at least officially. The ordeal for the wife suspected of adultery (Num. 5:11-31), though, smacks of magic and is similar to Mesopotamian practices, as will be seen.

Sidebar 3: Omen Wisdom

Mesopotamians had two types of divination: inspired, where a deity reveals the future to a person in a dream or vision. The other type was deductive divination, where the gods reveal the future through signs in nature. A horse mounting an ox means a reduction in the numbers of livestock. A person losing his seal (form of identity) means his son will disappear. Here is an astrological example: “If the Moon, on rising, is partly dimmed, the right point of its crescent broken off, but the other sharp and perfectly discernible—the country’s economic activity will stagnate for three years” (Bottéro 2001, 192).

Political Wisdom

Political advice was a highly desired commodity among the Israelite elite. A poor but wise man in a besieged city was able to deliver the city due to his expertise in military strategy (Eccles. 9:13-16). The political advice of Ahithophel, David's counselor, is described as "according to a man who asked concerning the word of God" (2 Sam. 16:23). David's nephew, Jonadab, is described as a "very wise man" (*chakam me'od*) (2 Sam. 13:3), who advises his cousin, Amnon, on how he might trap his beautiful half-sister Tamar, Absalom's full sister, to rape her with impunity. However, the advice eventually backfires when Amnon later dies at the hands of Absalom for this treachery.

Rhetorical Wisdom

A special type of wisdom might be called expertise in rhetoric. When a lyre-player is sought for king Saul to soothe the evil spirit God had sent upon him, one of his officers recommended David and described him as "one who knows how to play an instrument, is very strong, a man of war, knowledgeable in speech, handsome, and the Lord is with him" (1 Sam. 16:18). The Hebrew phrase literally is "one skillful (root *byn*, a synonym of *chakam*) in speech," which means David was an effective speaker and negotiator. David demonstrated his talent in speech by turning the table on the Philistine giant Goliath (1 Sam. 17:41-51). He literally takes Goliath's rhetorical flourish and turns it against him, using Goliath's very words, and, then, delivers what he has just promised!

The importance of the art of rhetoric is especially emphasized in the book of Proverbs, where many aphorisms abound that promote the value of gracious speech:

Death and life are in the hand of the tongue,
and the one who loves it, will eat its fruit (18:21).
Like a honeycomb are pleasant words,
sweet to the soul and health to the bones (16:24).

The Egyptian text, the “Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” was apparently composed to instruct young scribes in the importance of persuasive speech. The story tells of a poor farmer who is able to convince the Pharaoh and his noblemen to side in his favor against a high steward who had wronged him.

Literary or Aesthetic Wisdom

The last category of wisdom involves literary finesse and subtlety. The prologue to Proverbs refers to their ascertainment as one of the aims of the book: “to understand an aphorism and figure, the words of the wise and their riddles” (1:6). This signifies that comprehending wisdom literature is not always straightforward and that training is necessary. It also indicates that it is not just the content of wisdom that is important but also its medium, the package it is placed in. A later chapter will be devoted to examining the high artistic quality of the wisdom literature and its genres.

The Semantic Domain of Wisdom

In America, one often hears someone distinguish between knowledge and wisdom: “Being wise doesn’t mean just knowing facts. It means knowing how to use them.” That notion is true for ancient Israel and the rest of the ancient Near East as well. The French phrase “savoir-faire” is apt here: “know-how.” In the Hebrew Bible, words for “wisdom” and for “being wise” are frequently paired with nouns for “knowledge,” “understanding,” “instruction,” and

“advice,” and verbs like “to know,” “to instruct,” “to prescribe” and “to advise” (see Müller 1980, 371-72). In Hebrew, the root *chkm* (“to be wise”) is synonymous with *byn* (to understand) and *ydʹ* (“to know”). The Hebrew wisdom literature naturally likes to cluster these synonyms:

Should the wise (root *chkm*) answer with windy knowledge (root *ydʹ*)
and fill themselves with the east wind? (Job 15:2).
For the Lord gives wisdom (root *chkm*);
from his mouth come knowledge (root *ydʹ*)
and understanding (root *byn*)[] (Prov. 2:6).

Wisdom is often connected with “instruction.” In Prov. 21:11 “become wise” is in parallel “to obtain knowledge”:

In the punishment of a scoffer the simple become wise (root *chkm*),
and in the instruction of the wise they obtain knowledge (root *ydʹ*).

Root *chkm* is semantically related to root *zaqen* (“to be old”) and root *tsdq* (“to be righteous”) (Müller 1980, 372). In Job 32:9, the young whippersnapper Elihu tries to challenge the normative assumption that age and wisdom belong together: “It is not the aged that are wise, nor the old that understand justice.” To El it is said, “[T]he gray of your beard has truly instructed you” (Müller 1980, 366). “Wisdom” and “righteous” (or the notion of piety) also appear together frequently:

Give to the wise and he will become wiser still,
make the righteous knowledgeable
and he will increase learning (Prov. 9:9).
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
but wisdom and discipline fools despise (Prov. 1:7).

The last verse cited is usually considered the motto for the book of Proverbs. Fearing God in the Hebrew Bible, but especially in the

wisdom literature, means being pious, i.e., being righteous. This does not mean that wisdom and righteousness are totally synonymous. We have already seen that wisdom can be used for good or bad, and the term sometimes implies simply a skill or expertise that is morally neutral. However, it does point to the fact that wisdom often has a moral dimension, especially when referring to a wise lifestyle. This also means that wisdom always assumes a religious perspective. It would be anachronistic to speak of some sort of secular knowledge or wisdom existing in the ancient world. All ancient peoples were religious, to one degree or another, in the ancient Near East. There were no true atheists, though there were plenty of dissidents and the unorthodox. This is one of the things that distinguishes the modern intellect and science from ancient ways of knowing, which are always morally and religiously based. From an ancient standpoint, a person who is truly wise would adopt a pious lifestyle. Most ancient peoples thought that being faithful to one's deity would be repaid with long life and prosperity—obviously a wise choice!

For ancient peoples, including Israel, the “heart” (*leb*) was the seat of wisdom, instead of the head (see Müller 1980, 372). The wise are often called “wise of heart” (e.g., Job 9:4; Prov. 10:8; 16:21). God provides a wise and discerning heart to Solomon (1 Kgs. 3:12). In 1 Kgs. 4:29, “wisdom” is equated with “breadth of heart.” The fool, contrarily, is “without heart” (*chesar leb*).

Antonyms of “wise” (*chakam*) include *kesel* (“stupid”), *‘evil* (“foolish”), *sakhal* (“foolish”), *nabal*, and *lets* (“babbling” or “scoffer”) (see Müller 1980, 372). The wise and the fool are often juxtaposed in the book of Proverbs, which serves to clarify the distinctive characteristics of these categories of people: “The wise store up knowledge, but the mouth of the fool means destruction nearby” (10:14).

Two Broad Kinds of Wisdom

We have examined wisdom as a skill or ability that people either had naturally or had attained it with instruction and developed it with practice. However, there is another type of wisdom that is perhaps the dominant kind in the wisdom literature. It is less a particular skill or gift and more a lifestyle. Often when the wisdom writers in the Hebrew Bible refer to “the wise” or “the righteous” or “the fool” or “the wicked,” they are referring to a lifestyle that reflects a certain moral disposition rather than a specific talent:

The wise of heart will heed commandments,
but foolish lips will be ruined (Prov. 10:8)
The righteous are delivered from need,
but the wicked will enter it instead (11:8).

Compare this with Eccles. 8:1 and 8:5:

Who is like the *wise* and who knows
the interpretation of a matter? (v. 1).
One who keeps the command will avoid an evil matter,
time and sentence the heart of the *wise* knows (v. 5).

Scott C. Jones (2006, 211–28) makes the case that this section is about the liabilities of mantic wisdom (e.g., Daniel’s skills) in the context of the court. This means that the type of wisdom being referred to here is very technical and, thus, not available to the general public and only an option for specialists.

The German term *Lebenskunst* (“the art of living”) appropriately captures the nuance of lifestyle wisdom. Again, this type of wisdom does not necessarily refer to a superior kind of intellect or gift but is a kind of wisdom that anyone could practice; it is, thus, potentially universal and democratic. The wise lifestyle would fit what we today would call being a conformist, someone who abides by the norms

and mores of society, i.e., a good citizen. The fool, however, would be what we would call a deviant: a gang member, criminal, troublemaker, etc.; one who does not play by the rules. The wise conformist would do his/her duty to the larger public, whether village or city, but he would also wisely look out for the interest of his immediate family, defend their honor, and only bring prestige to their reputation. Scripture does not clearly differentiate between wisdom (or folly) as a lifestyle and as a gift or talent, and they often overlap. As we shall see, scribes could do both simultaneously!

Who Were the Sages?

Now that we have broadly defined what wisdom is (a skill and a lifestyle) and shown some of the different ways the concept has been used in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near East, it is now time to identify the sages. Again, as said in the beginning, there was no one clearly defined group that was described as sages (*chakemim* or “wise ones”) in ancient Israel, unlike for the priests and prophets. This is chiefly so because the concept of wisdom, having so many different nuances and usages, could be applied to a greater number of types of individuals and groups. In other words, there would have been a lot more possible ways of being wise for an Israelite than for being priestly or prophetic.

While any Israelites could have lived a wise lifestyle, not all Israelites would have been considered sages. All of the latter would have to be specially qualified and assume a particular role, many having exceptional gifts, abilities, and/or expertise in particular crafts, skills, and types of knowledge. There were certainly professional sages in ancient Israel who would have had to undergo special training and education, and who, as a group, formed a type of vocational guild. But there were amateur sages as well, who trained