

To appreciate the relationship between Wisdom and the Psalter requires an understanding of the characteristics of Wisdom Literature itself and indeed the entire sapiential movement in Israel.

Below I offer a brief summary of the main characteristics of Wisdom in its relationship to prophecy and covenant. Furthermore, I include an article by Anthony Ceresko entitled, "The Sage in the Psalms," from a volume edited by Leo Perdue which covers the Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East. In this article, Ceresko points out several levels of relationship between the wisdom movement and the Psalter that are worth noting.

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WISDOM LITERATURE AND THE COVENANT

A) The Rise of Wisdom Literature in Israel

The presence of wisdom motifs in the early strata of Israel's written works can be testified throughout the Torah and prophetic writings. (Note: "What has straw in common with wheat," Jer 23:28). A proverb is meant to teach a practical insight into dealings between people, in nature and in life in general. Israel shared this practical wisdom with neighbouring cultures. Scribes learned to write, to draw up documents, to interpret, both in the cultic and secular fields. There were schools for this form of education. Tablets of practice material have been found in clay where the scribbled, chiseled marks of a novice followed the example of the master. Often these schools for learning were attached to the courts, where techniques were acquired and learned to support the intricate political dealings between various groups and nations. No clear-cut distinction was drawn between the sacral and the secular.

Wisdom Literature however refers to a body of writing that is characterized by the employment of rational, common sense arguments in the encounter of mystery, order and dread in the world and in the affairs of humans. Though elements of this literature, such as the riddle and the proverb, go as far back as the very beginning of Israel's written recordings, a preeminence of wisdom literature begins late in Israel's history. It is difficult to define the actual ramifications of wisdom literature. The definitions often are either so narrow as to eliminate such works as the Song of Songs or so wide as to engulf practically all of the bible. But general consensus centres on the characteristic of wisdom literature's didactic scope that relies primarily on observance and experience rather than explicit divine revelation.

These works which are primarily didactic, though they may include exhortative and parenetic material, are best exemplified in Job, Proverbs, Qohelet, Sirach, the Wisdom of Solomon and specific wisdom Psalms, such as Ps 1, 139. What is striking about the actual content of these works is the relative absence of references to the many covenant expressions in Israel's history. Instead of a focus on the covenant image as the preferred image for articulating the relationship between Israel and God, there is the preponderance of the image of "creation" that becomes the forum for the wisdom writers' theological discussion. Even the concept of the Torah, the teachings of God for Israel, appear more as a special gift of God's wisdom than as laws emerging from the bond of the covenant. These writings represent a cultural shift in Israel. The exclusivistic tendency of covenant theology recedes to the background while the universality of creation theology emerges in the foreground. Instead of identifying the will of God exclusively through the unique acts of God's salvation toward Israel, creation theology looks to the insertion of Israel in God's creation for language to depict and express her relationship to God.

For the most part, these works are late in Israel's history, composed during the Persian and Hellenistic periods between the 5th and 1st centuries BCE. The question arises as to why they are so late, given that this form of writing was very dominant in the Near East and Israel would have been in contact with these sapiential, literary works of the Ancient world. Certainly

one reason could be that Israel would have come to learn the repertoire of Near Eastern wisdom primarily in the exile. However, another reason should not be overlooked and that is the demise of prophetic oracles and teaching as a trustworthy and reliable means of procuring the knowledge of God's will.

The tragedy of the Babylonian captivity which witnessed the destruction of the temple, including the ark of the covenant (cf Jer 3:16, 2 Macc 2:5), caused a fundamental questioning of the traditional sources of authority. The prophet, priest and King were the main personages who could speak with authority for the people of Israel. The prophets, both cultic and other, could speak with authority because of their training and the personal revelation received in ecstasy, vision or prayer. The priests could speak with authority in certain areas of cultic and social life due to the family heritage and the cultic responsibilities. The King could speak with authority by virtue of God's covenant promise to David through Nathan. These sources of authority could coalesce onto a single individual. Ezekiel was both priest and prophet.

The Babylonian captivity shook to its very foundation these sources of authority. The king was gone. The temple was destroyed. Therefore the priest could not practice his service nor execute responsibilities. The burden of responsibility would be transferred to the prophet. Ezekiel and Second Isaiah are the speakers for the period of the exile itself. But precisely here we arrive at the crux of the difficulty. The return from the exile did not witness the flowering in prophetic teaching but rather saw the rise of another form of teaching that was primarily didactic. To be sure prophetic teaching continued in such figures as Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi. But these prophets did not enjoy the same authority as the predecessors prior to the exile. This can be partly explained by the crisis of prophetic authority in the last days of the Kingdom of Judah as witnessed by Jeremiah and partly by the new concern in prophetic teaching after the exile with practical life.

The cultic prophets had been seriously challenged by Jeremiah (Jer 23, Ezek 13), who called them whitewashers and liars, who do not speak with the name of the Lord. This crisis of prophetic oracles where you have one prophet speaking in the name of God, "Thus says the Lord", and others contradicting the supposed will of God, could not be overcome. After the exile, the prophetic style of seeking God's will through ecstatic experience and imparting knowledge of God's will through authoritative declarations never materialized. In both the piety and the theological vision of the people, the authority of the King became projected into the future as the reign of God; the priestly authority continued within cultic life whose importance rose tremendously; prophetic authority was taken up by wisdom teachers and apocalyptic teaching.

Wisdom teachers based their authority not on a personal divine inspiration, but in the accumulation of wisdom through observation. The idea of life completely being embedded in sacral ordinances has gone. But this has by no means affected a diminished faith in Israel's God. In the wisdom writings we see the teachers holding together the awareness of inherent determinism and order in creation, and unswerving faith in God's power.

This unity was achieved by the concerted presentation of all of creation being in the hands of God who formed it with intelligence and order and continues to exercise authority with order and power. Wisdom literature takes up the teaching authority of the prophets, but does not overly concern itself with the aspect of God's judgment which was so important for the major prophets, and for every Israelite who believed that life was governed by sacral ordinances. However, after the exile this feature of judgment which was so crucial in Israel's self identity was transposed again into cosmic proportions. This form of literature, which is parallel to the forms of wisdom

writings and is often considered a part of wisdom literature itself is termed apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature, best exemplified in the biblical book of Daniel, is concerned to present the judgement of God through cosmic proportions and imagery. Both wisdom and apocalyptic writings share a common prophetic source.

Old wisdom identifies the Law, the Torah, with wisdom and the good life. In other words we see a borrowing from the vocabulary and motifs of wisdom in Israel's literature to bolster and support faith in the Lord. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 22:17-19, Amenemope, ANET, p. 421d). The wisdom teachers through their observations conclude that wisdom calls them to have trust in the Lord for his faithfulness and goodness.

In order to call forth this trust by their writings, the teachers use the known teaching methods: the instructional story (the Joseph story in Genesis has characteristics of wisdom motifs), proverbs, the teaching of a father to a son, the doctrine of the two ways. They developed ponderous styles that delved into the mysteries of life and God's will: the personification of wisdom, order in creation, the disputes of justice and suffering, reasoning against apostasy and idol worship. It is interesting to note the hopeful and positive dynamism in Israel's wisdom writings. When Proverbs appears to borrow from the wisdom of Amenemope, trust in God is precisely a dimension that Israel's wisdom teacher add. (G. Von Rad, p. 191-193, Prov 22:17-19)

The variety of genres and styles in wisdom writings:

- 1) instructional stories - Egypt (ANET, p. 412, Vizier Ptah-Hotep)
- 2) proverbs, numbers, acrostic structures (alphabetical progressions of verse.
- 3) teaching of a father to a son (testaments)
- 4) the doctrine of the two ways, the righteous and the wicked
- 5) the personification of wisdom (Wis 7-10, Prov 8, Sirach 24, ANET p. 431, attributes of a Pharaoh)
- 6) the contemplation of creation
- 7) dispute/dialogue
- 8) reasoning against apostasy and idols.

Though wisdom is anthropological in the sense that the locus for knowing God's will and plan is human experience, human wisdom soon reaches the limits of its horizon when unaccompanied by the personified wisdom of God. In other words, "human wisdom" that does not open itself to the mysteries of creation that testify to its limitations becomes "folly".

B) The Style of Wisdom Teaching

The wisdom teachers essentially attempt to convince or praise through argument. This is a far distant approach from the style of the prophets who attempted to convince, praise and judge with a claim of speaking in the name of the Lord, communicating God's will and wrath. Though the wisdom writers were inspired by much of the prophetic teachings, the method of teaching and communicating had changed. The wisdom writers took over from the prophets the need for absolute trust in the Lord's plan, the realization that trusting the Lord leads to life whereas disobedience leads to folly and death. But the authority from which the wisdom writers speak is not that of a privileged call from God. The source of their authority is the accumulated experience

of right living.

The wisdom of the sages begins from below, so to speak, and from the common experience of the world and human reflection. It appeals to common sense and to the intelligence of the ordinary person as well as to the educated. From this perspective “of below,” wisdom also takes on the quality of mystery. Since wisdom is intimately linked to God and creation, it remains within the realm of God even as it orders human life.

What makes this wisdom from below religious is the assertion that human beings and all creation have been made with the wisdom of God. Human wisdom and divine wisdom are not contrary poles, but human wisdom is essentially oriented by the wisdom of God. The personified wisdom, that had been at the side of God at the moment of creation, has fashioned the human heart and the human mind precisely to receive the wisdom that comes from God as a gift. In other words human wisdom is completed and fulfilled in welcoming and in receiving the wisdom of God. Accordingly, the human intellect is fundamentally oriented to seeking the wisdom of God precisely because humans have been formed in her image. Only when people are disoriented and truncated from the life of God, do their reasoning and efforts become confused and fail. (*They are rendered worthless and likely to fail*, Wis 9:14.) Conversely, the one who acts in accordance to the inherent orientation of wisdom, like Solomon,¹ seeks to cooperate with the forces of wisdom in order to be saved and to live a life pleasing to God (Wis 9:18).

Wisdom writings also manifest an auto-critical capacity. Wisdom itself comes under scrutiny especially when the limits of human wisdom are not appreciated. The critical capacity of the prophetic movement was oriented essentially towards Israel’s unfaithful relationship with God. The wisdom writers employ self-criticism toward systems of theology which tend to reduce the relationship to a onesided view. For instance, the Book of Job manifests a critical assault on a theory of retributive justice that reduces all human experience of pain and suffering as punishment for unfaithfulness. It is an attack against a mechanistic interpretation of the Deuteronomistic presentation of the covenant of conversion. The Book of Jonah can be viewed as an assault against a conception of Israel that is overly confident and exclusivistic of her election by God. The Book of Qohelet posits a severe critique against any view that would hope to exhaust or reduce the manifold aspects of the relationship between humanity and God. These works manifest a spiritual maturity that can be defined by its ability to be open to self-criticism from within.

C) The Culmination of Prophetic and Sapiential Teaching

¹ Note, if the figure of Moses towers over the pentateuch and became the archetype for prophecy, it is the figure of Solomon, preeminent in wisdom, who becomes the archetype of the ideal wise person for wisdom literature, see 1Kings 3.

Within the sphere of cultic life, prophetic teaching culminates in laments and in praise. It appeals to the authority of God who builds and destroys. It recalls the great and mighty deeds of the past in order to enlist the trust and obedience of the people to the will of God. It sees trust in one's own power as the sin against God's goodness which incurs his judgment and wrath in order to turn the people's heart back to God. The backdrop for this theological perspective is the covenant or the immediacy of the Israelite's bond to God. To fulfil the instruction of God in the Torah is to be in continuity with this personal God who has chosen Israel. To break these commandments is the betrayal through unfaithfulness of God who is always faithful.

Wisdom teaching culminates in the contemplation of creation in union with God. It appeals to the intelligent plan of God in creation and in history through which God calls people to share in the creation of the world. It recalls the beauty of creation, the order in the universe, in order to convince with reasonable arguments that the fulfilment of life rests on trusting God and walking in his ways. "*Fools say in their heart, there is no God.*" In abandoning or in opposing the wisdom of God, a person opposes the order in which every human being has been fashioned. The backdrop for this theological perspective is the creation of the universe according to God's wisdom and the fashioning of the human heart according to the image and likeness of God. To cooperate with the wisdom of God leads to happiness and life. To rely on one's own power is folly which leads ultimately to misery and to death. In the perspective of wisdom, the Torah which is the gift of God's wisdom to Israel and the call to participate in creation is removed at least on the surface level from the context of covenant theology and placed in relationship to all of creation. The realities of covenant theology such as, faithfulness, the bond between the Lord and his people, life and death in and without God, are all present in the new perspective of the wisdom writings. But the authoritative source for presenting these realities in wisdom is not the image and bond of the covenant, but rather Israel's insertion in creation and her intimate contact with the wisdom of God.

In the theologies that concentrate on the various covenants, it is the unique and personal acts of the Lord that are recalled and cherished and evoked. Essentially these are theologies "from above," based on unique revelations and interventions of the Lord in human history, certainly within Israel's history. The covenant relationship between Israel and God is seen to highlight the uniqueness, the peculiarity, the specificity of Israel as a people.

In the theologies of the wisdom writers, God works through the ordinary activities of human life. The wisdom of God fashioned the human heart, fashioned the universe at the dawn of creation. Wisdom continues to direct creation. Therefore, the locus for discovering God's will for Israel is in the ordinary and common place events of human living. Wisdom herself toils and labours with human beings to discover this will of God in life. Finally human wisdom, summarized in the famous wisdom saying "*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,*" points to a dominant wisdom principle. Human wisdom, fashioned as it is on the wisdom of God, is open to and in fact is completed and fulfilled by the uniquely revealed wisdom of God. Human wisdom then is a preparatory activity for receiving the unique events of God's intervention in human history. The relationship of Israel to all of creation is seen to highlight the universal dimensions of Israel's faith. God is not only LORD of Israel, but of the entire creation, universe and peoples. Universality and the dignity of the individual will be a few of the hallmarks of sapiential values.

The covenant image in the pre-monarchic and monarchic periods clarified the primordial features of God's relationship with Israel and God's activity in history. God offers life and calls for human participation in this life. These two primordial features of the human-divine dialogue are taken up in the wisdom writings, but not from a theology of above where the unique interventions of God in history are acclaimed. Rather they are taken up from the perspective of a theology from below. The image of the unique covenants between the Lord and Israel was particularly suitable and pliable for a theology that looked to the unique events in human history and divine interventions for meaning. These unique interventions say something quite extraordinary of God's dealings with humans. Sapiential literature that begins from below is thoroughly anthropocentric, reaching outward to the unique divine word addressed to human beings. Just as the covenant was an appropriate image that highlighted the unique expressions of God's love to Israel in concrete history, so too is creation the appropriate backdrop for the wisdom writers to highlight the universality of God's relationship to Israel and to all peoples.

The two primordial issues at work in covenant theologies, namely promise and commitment, appear in wisdom writings in a different manner. The feature of commitment is elicited by the practical advice wisdom teachers offer. Commitment is evoked in the most sublime way through the presentation of the Torah as the explicit articulation of God's wisdom for human action. The feature of promise culminates in the contemplation of creation. The beauty of creation and the belonging to creation which God's wisdom has fashioned and maintains is a source of hope and dignity.

NOTE: In the New Testament writings, the authors deliberately present Christ as the fulfilment of Israel's covenant and Israel's wisdom. In the new covenant of the eucharist, the gift of God's very life empowers Christians to act as Christ - to love others as Christ has loved. Christ's word of preaching the good news is the Torah that calls all people to love one's enemies. Christ as a human and divine being joins together the theology from above, the unique interventions of God in history, and the theology from below, the openness of human beings to hearing the divine word of transcendence.

Gammie, John G., Leo G. Perdue, eds. *The Sage In Israel and The Ancient Near East*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990.

THE SAGE IN THE PSALMS

Anthony R. Ceresko

One can speak about the relationship of the sage to the psalms, and to the Psalter, from a variety of viewpoints. For example, most commentators admit the presence in the Psalter of a small group of “wisdom psalms,” that is, psalms that come from the hand of wisdom writers and that reflect wisdom themes and terminology.¹ Also, a number of other psalms, if not wisdom psalms in the strict sense, suggest at least some influence from wisdom circles.² Finally, the Psalter itself is clearly the product of the torah/wisdom teachers, and the final form of this collection of songs bears the stamp of their influence and intent.³ Thus my title, “The Sage in the Psalms,” implies a number of meanings, and I will explore three of them. First, the sage in the Psalms could mean the portrait of the sage, as opposed to the fool, which the psalms themselves present. When one reads the psalms, what does “being wise” seem to imply? One could also understand the sage in the Psalms to mean the sage as author of psalms. In other words, one could examine the wisdom psalms, and the Psalter, looking for answers to questions such as who were these sages and what concerns did they have; what was their purpose in creating the literary productions they have left us. Finally, one could study the Psalter itself, the Book of Psalms, as the product of the sage’s work. Thus the compositions therein, once the words by which Israel spoke to God in praise, thanksgiving, and supplication, have now become the Word of God to Israel, the means by

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1. R. E. Murphy’s article, “A Consideration of the Classification ‘Wisdom Psalms,’” *Congress Volume: Bonn 1962 (VTSup 9; Leiden: Brill, 1963)* 156-67 (repr. in SAIW 456-67), often serves as a starting point in the discussion of wisdom psalms. See also the more recent treatment of J. L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 180-85 (note his bibliography on p. 257 n. 8), and the cautions of G. T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct: A Study in the Sapientializing of the Old Testament* (BZAW 151; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1980) 12.

2. Murphy, “Consideration of the Classification ‘Wisdom Psalms,’” 165-67.

3. Cf. C. H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBLDS 76; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

which God reveals himself and his will to his people, especially to those trained and able to use the Book faithfully and wisely.

THE SAGE AS PICTURED BY THE PSALMS
AND THE PSALTER: ONE WHO PRAYS
AND WHO OBSERVES THE TORAH

To associate certain psalms, or even the Psalter itself, with the wisdom movement in ancient Israel is to imply a connection with teaching and learning. This may at first appear problematic since the psalms, by definition, are principally prayers and are associated first and foremost with the temple and worship rather than the school. However, as some authors have pointed out, the liturgy itself offers occasions for teaching,⁴ and it is precisely at this point of common concern, the didactic, that an important link between the psalms and wisdom is established. The most obvious moment is the “testimony” or “confession” element of the Thanksgiving Psalm when the psalmist recounts an experience of deliverance and, on the basis of that experience of God’s protection and benevolence, proceeds to exhort the congregation to trust in God’s promise of help:

Thus the testimony to some extent assumes the nature of an *admonition*, whether it calls the person blessed, who confesses his sins and obtains forgiveness and is healed from illness and impurity, or straightway invites others to follow the example of the worshipper (Ps. xxxi 24, xxxii 6 f., xxxiv 6 if., cxxiv 8). Here the style and ideas of the “poetry of wisdom” are likely to have made themselves felt; for even the latter has for its object exhortative religious and moral instruction, where the teacher (father) often refers to his own experience as a guarantee of the truth of his words.⁵

Common to both the psalms and the wisdom movement is also the ideological function of “world-building.” One of the points of origin of the wisdom movement was the socialization process that took place within Israel and indeed is a process fundamental to every society and culture. In ancient Israel, it was in the context of the family/clan and school that this process took place of “taking over the world in which

4. E.g., R. E. Murphy, *The Psalms, Job* (Proclamation Commentaries; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 34.

5. S. Mowinckel, “Psalms and Wisdom,” *WIANE* 213-14. See also Murphy, “Consideration of the Classification ‘Wisdom Psalms,’” 161; and J. K. Kuntz, “The Canonical Wisdom Psalms of Ancient Israel - Their Rhetorical, Thematic, and Formal Dimensions,” *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (ed. J. J. Jackson and M. Kessler; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1974) 190.

others already lived” and of apprehending “the world as a meaningful and social reality.”⁶ Both the origins and the products of Israel’s wisdom movement are associated with this process of socialization or “world-building” for the young.

If the wisdom movement involved itself in the handing on of the knowledge and values of the community (“the world” in which that community lived) to the next generation, the cult, with its sacred songs (the psalms) functioned to maintain, reshape, and celebrate that world. The wisdom school and the psalmist intersect in their common enterprise of maintaining and/or reshaping this world inhabited by the community of Israel, particularly in the question of the individual and his or her role, comportment, and place in this world.⁷ The picture of the “pious” and wise individual - and the foil, the wicked and foolish one - is communicated both directly and indirectly in the poems produced by the wisdom psalmists. From them we can piece together the picture of the ideal Israelite that the authors of the wisdom psalms wished to present, and the words, actions, and attitudes that could truly be characterized as “wise.”

J. K. Kuntz lists a number of miscellaneous counsels that, taken together, present a quite concrete description of everyday actions and attitudes of the wise person as portrayed in the psalms:

Psalmic wisdom recommends that man be mindful of the company that he keeps (1:1) and prudent in his speech (34:14). He should desist from anger (37:8) and quest for peace (34:15; 37:37), living in true harmony with his brothers (Psalm 133). In his dealings he is expected to manifest signs of meekness (37:11; cf. 49:13, 21), generosity (112:5, 9), and integrity (62:11, 112:5). Moreover, he is admonished to wait upon Yahweh in a spirit of trust (32:10; 37:3, 5, 7, 34; 62:9) and confer with the deity in all that he undertakes (127:1-2). As a recompense for his devotion to Yahweh, he may look forward to a large and prosperous family (128:1-4). Finally, he is commanded to shun evil and do good (34:15; 37:3, 27).⁸

6. P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 130; cf. J. H. Hayes, *An Introduction to Old Testament Study* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) 325-29.

7. A. Robert, for example, comments that in Psalm 119 “it is the individual who is in focus, and no longer the nation”; “Le psaume CXIX et les Sapientiaux,” *RB* 48 (1939) 19.

8. Kuntz, “Canonical Wisdom Psalms,” 215. One could elaborate this picture, especially from the frequent description of “the contrasting life styles of the righteous and the wicked” in psalmic wisdom. Psalm 37 is particularly important in this regard; cf. Kuntz, “Canonical Wisdom Psalms,” 213-14; and H. Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen: Die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels* (3d ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1975) 392. By way of contrast, Ps 10:3-11 offers a “remarkably detailed description of the godless man,” although Kuntz does not attribute wisdom links to the passage (“Canonical Wisdom Psalms,” 205).

However, one could parallel almost all of these traits in the Book of Proverbs, for example. When one examines psalmic wisdom, one must recognize two further dimensions to the picture of the sage - veneration of the torah and devotedness to prayer. These are apparent as much from the spirit and shape of the Psalter itself as from individual wisdom or wisdom - influenced psalms. For although a small minority of individual psalms are specifically linked with the sages, the Psalter as such is a product of the postexilic community when the sage had become the scholar-sage or "scribe." For the latter, wisdom had become identified with the torah and the wise individual was thus one whose "delight is in the law [*tôrâ*] of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Ps 1:2 Rsv).¹⁰ Also, since many of these scribes were priests, the interest in the cult, and especially prayer, had become more central.¹¹

Certain psalms (e.g., Psalms 1 and 119), then, and particularly the whole collection, the Psalter, taken together, image the wise individual as one who venerates the *torah*:

In all instances the sage manifests his willingness to subordinate himself to the divine will. . . His task is to comprehend that will as it is revealed in the written Torah and his joy is to experience unmitigated delight in his thorough knowledge of the law.¹²

Thus, "a spirituality of the Torah has been inserted into the framework of the psalter as a whole, and is one of the foremost guidelines of interpretation of the book, a real key to its understanding." One example of the redactional activity that has given this slant to the Psalter

9. S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (2 vols.; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 2:204: "While the earlier small collections [of psalms] came into existence among the singers, the Psalter as a whole, and probably even the Davidic psalms group I (Pss. 3-41) were collected by the learned, 'the scribes', 'the wise'. Their interest in psalmography along with their interest in the ancient sacred tradition and all matters of religion led them to create out of the earlier cultic booklets the large Psalter."

10. Thus does J. Reindl, "Weisheitliche Bearbeitung von Psalmen: Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Sammlung des Psalters," *Congress Volume: Vienna 1980* (ed. J. A. Emerton; VTSup 32; Leiden: Brill, 1981) 340-41, describe the one responsible for the editing of the Psalter: "He himself belongs among those men who were knowledgeable in the scriptures and nourished on torah - piety, those who had taken the place of 'the wise' of former times, and whose ideal image Ben Sira had sketched"; cf. Sir 39:1-11. Note also J. L. Mays, "The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter," *JBL* 106 (1987) 11: "Those who were at work in the final shaping and arrangement of the Psalter were completely committed to torah as the divinely willed way of life."

11. E.g., D. F. Morgan, *Wisdom in the Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 120.

12. Kuntz, "Canonical Wisdom Psalms," 212-13, commenting on "the piety which is indigenous to psalmic wisdom."

13. B. de Pinto, "The Torah and the Psalms," *JBL* 86 (1967) 174.

is the placing of Psalms 1 and 119, called “torah psalms” because of their emphasis on “torah” or “law, instruction,” at pivotal points in the collection. G. H. Wilson notes that

The placement of Ps 1 as an introduction to the whole Psalter . . . offers the *reader* a pair of “hermeneutical spectacles” through which to view the contents.... Ps 1 emphasizes individual meditation rather than communal recitation. The psms thus become the source of *each* man’s search for the path of obedience to the “Torah of YHWH”: the path which leads from death to life.¹⁴

In addition, the “massive presence” of Psalm 119 dominates and forms the central focus for the final section of the Psalter (Book V), in this way highlighting the centrality of torah meditation and balancing the introductory Psalm 1 whose main theme it shares.¹⁵

Besides veneration of the torah, the wisdom redactors of the Psalter and authors of the wisdom psalms recognized an interest in and devotion to *prayer* as a further trait of the wise individual.¹⁶ First of all, the authors of these psalms picture themselves as uttering prayers (e.g., Ps 19:15; 32:5; 73:17, 23-25, 28; 119). Second, they exhort the reader or listener to pray - to “magnify the Lord” and “exalt his name” (Ps 34:4), because “this poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, / and saved him out of all his troubles” (Ps 34:7 Rsv; see further Ps 32:11; 37:3-5). Finally, the Psalter as a whole is presented by its authors as a book to be used for prayer and praise.¹⁷

L. G. Perdue has studied the relationship between wisdom and worship and has concluded that psalms associated with wisdom fall into three categories in their connection with the cult: didactic poems that were not originally written for the cult but were included in the Psalter

14. Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 143. See also Murphy, “Consideration of the Classification ‘Wisdom Psalms,’” 162. L. Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult: A Critical Analysis of the Views of Cult in the Wisdom Literatures of Israel and the Ancient Near East* (SBLDS 30; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977) 330 n. 39, notes the similar role that Prov 1:1-7 plays for the Book of Proverbs in providing an interpretative context for what follows.

15. Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 223. Mays, “Place of the Torah-Psalms,” 9, includes Psalm 19 along with Psalms 1 and 119 and states: “It is not difficult to imagine how this unifying point of view [i.e., the centrality of torah], stated as an introduction to the Psalter and reiterated across its breadth, could provide a perspective from which the rest of the Psalter could be understood and read.”

16. Mowinckel, for example, comments: “In spite of the didactic character of the ‘learned psalmography’, . . . it has one essential thing in common with genuine psalmography: these poems are and will be considered as *prayers*”; “Psalms and Wisdom,” 208-9. For more on prayer as a wisdom *Gattung* see G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville/ New York: Abingdon, 1972) 47-49.

17. Mays, “Place of the Torah-Psalms,” 12.

by the editorial work of the postexilic scribes (Psalms 1, 37, 49, 112, 127);¹⁸ other poems that, “while not intended for use as cultic literature, nevertheless, do reflect over cultic rituals and dogmas” (Psalms 32, 34, 73);¹⁹ and psalms written by the wise specifically for use in the cult (Psalms 19A, 19B, 119). That the association of the later wisdom writers with the cult issues in an interest in and production of prayers is, for Perdue, a quite logical process. First of all, the wise quite naturally “exalted prayer as the single most important cultic act” because they “considered themselves to be able creators and gifted speakers of prayers, based on their ability to write artistic poetry and to speak cogently. ...”²⁰ Second, prayer was not only proper and acceptable but indeed the preeminent form of worship of the deity, and the prayer of the wise/righteous person won special hearing and had particular efficacy because of their high status in God’s eyes: “When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears, / and delivers them out of all their troubles” (Ps 34:18 RSV; see also Ps 37:39-40).²¹

THE SAGE AS AUTHOR OF PSALMS: WISDOM AND ORDER

One can also approach this topic by asking what one can learn about the sages themselves who wrote these psalms: what concerns did they have and what was their purpose in creating the literary products they have left us. For one thing, they were not motivated simply by esthetic concerns, *ars gratia artis*. Rather, esthetic interest is subordinated to, and in view of, the creation of community - the creation of the “social world” that Israel inhabited. For Israel’s imagination primarily “thinks in terms of the reality of community and the ways that community can reorder its public existence in different and liberating ways.”²² This recalls my discussion above concerning the sages’ role as world-builders both by involvement in the socialization process, that is, in their role as teachers, as transmitters of Israel’s social world to the next generation,

18. Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult*, 268. Perdue notes, however: “It is possible that during the liturgy a place was given to the recitation of didactic poetry, intended to instruct the cultic assembly. If this were the case, then the didactic poems could have had a cultic function as well” (p. 327 n. 19).

19. *Ibid.*, 268.

20. *Ibid.*, 312.

21. *Ibid.*

22. W. Brueggemann, “Imagination as a Mode of Fidelity,” *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard W. Anderson* (ed. J. T. Butler, E. W. Conrad, and B. C. Ollenburger; JSOTSup 37; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985) 24.

and through their contact with the cult and the latter's function in maintaining/shaping/transforming that world.²³

A key element in this world-building process is the concern for "order," a concern central to the wisdom movement in general, as R. E. Murphy, for example, has noted:

Wisdom attempts to establish or impose a kind of order upon the myriad human experiences that form the raw material of wisdom sayings and upon nature itself. . . . The sayings of the sages flow from experience and put order into the chaotic events that make up human life.²⁴

One of the primary sources even for the very concept of order is the stability of nature and humanity's experience of its regularity, daily and seasonally. Israel saw God at work in this stability and regularity, and this experience is a constant theme in Israel's praise of God in the psalms.²⁵ In the eyes of the wisdom writers, however, nature and the experience of its stability and regularity served mainly as terms of comparison.²⁶ For example, the generosity of God in the ordering of nature ("He provides food for those who fear him," Ps 111:5) becomes the model for the generous behavior of the one "blessed by Yahweh" in Psalm 112: "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor" (v 9).²⁷ Again, the order evident in the prosperity and fruitfulness of "the tree planted by streams of water" (Ps 1:3) and the decline of "the beasts that perish" (Ps 49:13, 21) mirrors for the psalmist the inevitable ends of the

23.W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 26, notes concerning S. Mowinckel's work on "the creative power of public worship": "Such worship is indeed 'world-making.' These psalms become a means whereby the creator is in fact creating the world. That perhaps is one meaning of the saying, 'God creates by Word.' That creative word is spoken in these psalms in the liturgical process, and it is in the world of worship that Israel 're-experiences' and 're-describes' the safe world over which God presides."

24.R. E. Murphy, "Wisdom and Yahwism," *No Famine in the Land: Studies in Honor of John L. McKenzie* (ed. J. W. Flanagan and A. W. Robinson; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975) 120.

25.Brueggemann notes, for example: "the most foundational experience of orientation is the daily experience of *life's regularities*, which are experienced as reliable, equitable, and generous. The psalmic community readily affirmed that this experience is ordained and sustained by God"; *Message of the Psalms*, 28. He proceeds to discuss Psalms 145, 104, 33, and 8 in this context.

26.Murphy, "Wisdom and Yahwism," 121.

27.Following Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 45-47, who notes that "Psalms 111 and 112 may belong together," and thus sees Psalm 111 providing "the theological basis for the moral conviction of 112" (p. 45). See also Mays, "Place of the Torah-Psalms," 10: "Psalms 111 and 112 are a set of two, both in the acrostic form, and clearly composed to complement each other."

wise and the wicked, respectively. In Psalm 19, the “fine-tuned regularity of the universe” (vv 2-7) witnesses to God’s power to ensure in turn a well-ordered and beneficent human community through the torah, observed faithfully by those who are wise and loyal (vv 8-15).²⁸

The concern with order, especially order within the community, informs the didactic intent of the authors of the wisdom psalms. W. Brueggemann comments, for example, on the pedagogical intent of Psalm 37: “The purpose of such instruction ... is to instill in the young socially acceptable modes of behavior,” since behavior such as this “contributes decisively to the well-being of the entire community.”²⁹ Such instruction presumes that the way society works is good and beneficent, and it warns against trespassing the community’s “good order.” Thus psalmic wisdom stresses the notion of “retribution,” that is, that such behavior is inevitably rewarded and its contrary invariably works ill both for the individual and for the community.³⁰

As I mentioned above (pp. 220-21), much of psalmic wisdom reflects the postexilic situation in which wisdom had become closely tied to torah. Psalms 1 and 119 are good examples of this development and, again, it reflects the focus on order. Observance of torah makes one wise and allows one to bring order into one’s daily life (e.g., Ps 119:97-104; see also Ps 1:1-3; 37:30-31). Motivation for such observance is further strengthened by the linking of torah with the divine will and its power for order. Through observance of torah one enters into communion with the one who is the source and center of this world’s structures and one is able to live an orderly and satisfying life according to his will and purpose (cf. Ps 119:89-93). The ultimate goal, however, is human community. Psalm 19, for example, celebrates the power for order inherent in the divine will and reflected in the stability of nature (vv 2-7). But the psalmist goes on to praise the torah through which that divine will is revealed so that it might become the basis in turn for the order and life of the community.³¹

For psalmic wisdom, one way in which this concern with order expresses itself concretely, indeed, visually, is in its employment of the acrostic.³² One of the functions of this convention is to underline the

28. R. J. Clifford, “The Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation,” *Theological Studies* 46 (1985) 516. Note also Mays, “Place of the Torah-Psalms,” 5.

29. Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 43.

30. See, e.g., Brueggemann’s treatment of Psalm 112 from this perspective; *ibid.*, 45-47.

31. Clifford, “Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation,” 516.

32. For a description of the acrostic device and its use in Hebrew poetry see W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (JSOTSup 26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984) 190-200; e.g., p. 190: “In an acrostic poem, the first letter of each line follows a certain sequence. Usually, this sequence is alphabetic, so that each line begins with a successive letter of the alphabet.”

well by the letters *ʾālep*, *lāmed*, and *pê*, which spell out the name of the first letter of the alphabet (*ʾālep*), along the right side of the column of verse and along the top in the first line.³⁸

R. E. Murphy and G. von Rad have both noted the implicit realization among the wisdom writers of the potential of language to “put order into the chaotic events that make up human life.”³⁹ I would carry this a step further and ask whether or not the “play” with the alphabet reflected in the use of the acrostic witnesses to the wisdom writers’ realization of the ordering potential of language specifically in its *written* form.⁴⁰ The poet of Psalm 34 underlines this ordering potential of written language not only by his use of the acrostic but also by the partial “frame” he creates for the written poem with the letters *ʾālep*, *lāmed*, and *pê*. These latter form the name of the first of the twenty-two “tools” used by the writer-poet in his attempt to wrest order and meaning out of the variety and seeming disconnectedness of everyday life. These three Letters-alep, *lamed*, *pê*-also supply the verb stem *ʾlp* I ‘to learn, teach’, which expresses the process by which one appropriates and hands on those insights one has gained.⁴¹

38. One is reminded of the guidelines or “frames” drawn by scribes in ancient times (e.g., on the scrolls discovered at Qumran) to keep the columns of writing or verse straight; cf. P. W. Skehan, G. W. MacRae, and R. E. Brown, “Texts and Versions,” *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 2:563 (§69:13). The recently discovered eighth-century-B.C.E. inscription on a plaster wall in the cave at Deir Alla in the Wadi Jabbok in Jordan was written in two columns (the second only partially filled), each framed by a thick red line; cf. A. Lemaire, “Fragments from the Book of Balaam Found at Deir Alla,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 11.5 (Sept./Oct. 1985) 31-35.

39. Murphy, “Wisdom and Yahwism,” 120. See also G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper and Row, 1962-65), 1:418: “In every stage of culture of course man is set the task of mastering life. To this end he needs to know it, and dare not cease from looking and listening to discover whether in the tangle of events something like conformity to law, an order, cannot be here and there discerned. . . . But the means of laying hold of and objectifying such orders when once perceived is language.”

40. The very use of the acrostic device presumes a literate milieu since such a device can be appreciated only in written form; its appeal is more to the eye and mind than to the ear. Cf. N. K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (SBT 14; London: SCM, 1954) 28-29; and W. G. E. Watson, “Trends in the Development of Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Comparative Study,” *UF* 14 (1982) 267. On the relationship between wisdom and the art of writing, see P. A. Munch, “Die alphabetische Akrostichie in der jüdische Psalmendichtung,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 15 (1936) 708-9.

41. The issue of the definition of “wisdom” and “wisdom writings” is much debated; see, e.g., Crenshaw’s “Introduction: On Defining Wisdom,” in his *Old Testament Wisdom*, 11-25. In the context of the foregoing discussion of the awareness on the part of these wisdom writers of the ordering power of language, I would offer the following definition: wisdom speech is characterized not only by an obvious skill with language but by evidence of a conscious exploitation of the potential of language to impose order on and derive meaning from experience and insight (cf. Ps 49:4-5). For example, T. Eagleton,

THE SAGE AS AUTHOR OF THE PSALTER:
HUMAN WORDS BECOME WORD OF GOD

In recent years not a few scholars have shifted their attention from the study of individual psalms to the Psalter itself.⁴² Previously, the Psalter was looked upon principally as a collection of hymns, the so-called “Hymn Book of the Second Temple,”⁴³ analogous to our modern hymnals. It was presumed that - apart from evidence that it was a kind of “collection of collections” that had been somewhat artificially divided into five “books” paralleling the five scrolls of the Torah - no unifying principle was necessarily at work; the placement of various hymns was due either to the influence of the earlier collections, or to simple happenstance.

Recent work on the Psalter, however, has brought to light clearer principles of organization, and it is becoming more apparent that what we have in the Book of Psalms is exactly that, *a book*, not a collection of hymns. Thus I will focus on two questions about the work of the sage as author of this Book of Psalms: what kind of book did he understand he was producing and how did he understand the process of authorship.

G. H. Wilson states that “in its ‘final form’ the Psalter is a book to be *read* rather than to be *performed*; to be *meditated over* rather than to be *recited from*.”⁴⁴ In other words, the author of the Psalter has produced a text meant to be incorporated into the set of texts that was becoming Israel’s “Sacred Scriptures.” One important indication of this is the key role that Psalm 1 plays as a “preface” to the Psalter.⁴⁵ As I noted above (p. 220), it was during this period (postexilic) that wisdom and torah piety were merging and the *Weisheitslehrer* (‘wisdom teacher’) was taking on the identity of the *Schriftgelehrter* (‘scribe’).⁴⁶

The New Left Church (London: Sheed and Ward, 1966) 65-66, comments on an episode in the Yahwist creation story, a text acknowledged to have connections with the wisdom movement: “In fact, it is by *naming*, that man comes, not to confirm objects in a detached existence, but to bring them within his control, as Adam’s naming of the beasts in Genesis [2:19] is an act of kingship over them - an affirmation of himself as a linguistic, and therefore human, animal.” (Cf. L. Alonso-Schökel, “Sapiential and Covenant Themes in Genesis 2-3,” *Theology Digest* 13 [1965] 3-10; repr. in SAIW 468-80.)

42. Wilson’s dissertation (*Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*) is a good example of this kind of shift.

43. E.g., B. W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (4th ed.; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986) 544. But note his more nuanced approach in *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 23. See also Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 206-7.

44. Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 207.

45. On the “introductory” role also of Psalm 2, see *ibid.*, 173, 207-11; Mays, “Place of the Torah-Psalms,” 10; and B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 516.

46. See Reindl, “Weisheitliche Bearbeitung von Psalmen,” 338-39.

With the placement of Psalm 1 at the head of the collection, the sage, now in his incarnation as scribe, has turned this collection of hymns finally into a text to be studied and meditated:

The effect of the editorial fixation of the first psalm as an introduction to the whole Psalter is subtly to alter how the reader views and appropriates the pss collected there. The emphasis is now on meditation rather than cultic performance; private, individual use over public, communal participation. In a strange transformation, Israel's words of response to her God have now become the Word of God to Israel.⁴⁷

The profile of the sage that emerges when one views him as author of the Psalter, then, is the profile of one who looks upon this book that has come from his hand as "Scripture," as "Word of God." A. Robert, in commenting on Psalm 119, a psalm that captures well the spirit of this "late" wisdom, notes

It is through the sacred text that the soul enters into communion with the thoughts and wishes of God, and yields to the divine pedagogy in a regular and ongoing way. . . . It is through reading that God reveals himself, and no longer through listening, since the era of the prophets has ended; or rather, reading is the only way by which one can henceforth enter into communication with Moses and the prophets.⁴⁸

If the sage saw his work as finally worthy of the label "Word of God," what was his warrant for such an assertion? I would suggest that the answer lies in the sage's understanding of the very act of authorship. B. L. Mack, in his study of Ben Sira's "Hymn in Praise of the Fathers" (chaps. 44-50) examines a text produced by one of those scholar-sages or "scribes."⁴⁹ Mack's conclusions about the attitude of this scribe come close to what may well have been the mind of the scribe(s) responsible for the Psalter.

In a chapter entitled "Writing: The Glory of the Scholar Sage,"⁵⁰ Mack argues that Ben Sira gives a portrait of the scholar-sage in his poem in praise of the scribal profession (Sir 39:1-11). The portrait owes a heavy debt to Hellenism both in its express combination of scholar-

47. Wilson, *Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 206; see also Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 513-14. Reindl, "Weisheitliche Bearbeitung von Psalmen," 339 (quoting H.-J. Kraus, *Die Psalmen* [5th ed.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1978] 136) notes: "In our context, 'the notion of *twrh* [torah] includes in every case and indeed even in first place the scroll of the Psalms.'"

48. Robert, "Le psaume CXIX et les Sapientiaux," 16-17.

49. B. L. Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic: Ben Sira's Hymn in Praise of the Fathers* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985).

50. *Ibid.*, 89-107.

ship, authorship, and the offering of instruction, as well as in its evidence of the scholar-sage's self-consciousness about his social role within the educational institutions of Judaism.⁵¹ Although first and foremost among the texts the scholar-sage studies is "the law of the Most High" (Sir 39:1a), his sources range much wider,⁵² and all of them are read as "wisdom texts," that is, all of them are understood as capable of disclosing knowledge and insight. The texts ...

form a canon of disparate genres held together by the scholar's common investment in them. He will study them to win a single vision. That single vision, moreover, will encompass the deep structure of things that orders all reality from God and his world of creation to human good and evil. If he succeeds, he will have overcome. No longer is he exegete and scholar merely, interpreting the texts of others. He will make those words, those texts, his own and find a voice for himself as author.⁵³

Peculiar to the Jewish sage's understanding of the authorship process is the context of prayer within which it takes place. That context of prayer, that context of communion with the deity, gives particular value to the product of the process. That "single vision" that he has won by his scholarship is characterized as a gift from God comparable to the inspired insight of the prophet and analogous to the Hellenistic view of poetic inspiration.⁵⁴ This is the significance for Mack of the central section (39:5-6) in Ben Sira's "Praise of the Scholar-Sage" (39:1-11) and the specific sequence of the three speech acts recorded therein:

The first (speech act) is the prayer for mercy; the second is the speaking of wisdom itself ("in double measure"); the third is thanksgiving. This means that the prayer for mercy and the prayer of thanksgiving frame the moment of inspiration. Wisdom speech is therefore divinely inspired, as speech that is possible only in the context of prayer.⁵⁵

Wilson's "strange transformation" that the Psalter has undergone at the hands of the scribal editors – that "Israel's words of response to her God have now become the Word of God to Israel"⁵⁶ – turns out not to be so strange after all. If one may compare the self-consciousness of Ben Sira

51. Ibid., 102

52. Cf. Sir 39:1b-4; e.g., "the wisdom of all the ancients," "prophecies," "the discourse of notable men," "the subtleties of parables," "the hidden meaning of proverbs," "the obscurities of parables" (RSV).

53. Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*, 96.

54. Ibid., 98-99.

55. Ibid., 98.

56. See above, pp. 227-28.

as Mack describes it and the self-consciousness of the author(s) of the Psalter, one can see that this is not simply a collection or compilation of liturgical texts but a unity intentionally greater than the sum of its parts. We have a book; not only that, we have a wisdom book;⁵⁷ and further, an “inspired” wisdom book, the work of a scholar-sage(s), if not yet fully self-conscious of his (their) role as author, at least on the way. And, following my characterization of the sage pictured by the psalms as “one who prays,” what would be more fitting an object of the scholar-sage’s authorial skill than a collection of Israel’s prayers?

CONCLUSION

Among the various aspects of the sage’s profile that have emerged, the following have been highlighted: the veneration of torah, the interest in prayer, the concern with order, the focus on writing, reading, and the written word as a medium of God’s revelation, and the sage’s self-consciousness as author. One note of caution should be sounded. The texts I have drawn upon for these elements of a profile of the sage in the psalms span hundreds of years. Taken together these elements do not necessarily represent the portrait of a single person during one particular time period. The closest one could come to a composite of the aspects described above would be the scholar-sage or scribe of the postexilic period. However, I would venture to guess that at least some of those who practice the craft today would recognize as desirable for themselves most, if not all (*mutatis mutandi*), of these very qualities.

57. Cf. Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*, 225 n. 9: “The authority of the Jewish scriptures for Ben Sira is a function of their capacity to be read as wisdom texts.”