

## Ups and Downs of Wisdom (הִכְמָה U) Tuition in Ancient Israel: A Recap of the Main Issues

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### Abstract

*As wise as Solomon' is an age long aphorism that is popularly used by many people all over the world to describe someone with exceptional wisdom or insight like that of Solomon. The wisdom books purported to be written by Solomon are rich in educating both the learned and the uneducated in the contemporary period. In the framework of ancient Israel, wisdom and Solomon are intimately connected. Wisdom is overstretched and over praised in itself and in their possessors. The other side of wisdom that portrays foolishness in the acts of its carriers has not been stressed the same way wisdom is emphasized, hence the need for this essay. The truth of life is that wisdom coexists with foolishness and the relationship between the two in human nature is complex. The article did a recap of the strengths and weaknesses of wisdom tuition in ancient Israel and discovered that the ever true precepts of wisdom with its other flipside of foolishness are important guideposts of life for individuals, modern families and the power centers. Wisdom with its foolishness or pitfall provides practical direction and serves as warning to people, especially to those who claim to be learned. The canonical hermeneutical framework of interpretation is used for the study*

**Keywords:** Ups, Downs, wisdom, tuition and recap

### Introduction

The Hebrew Scripture has three major divisions. This three-fold division is designated as the 'TaNaKh', a name obtained by using the first letter of each section of the Scripture in their Hebrew form (*Torah* - Law, *Nevi'im* – Prophets and *Kethuvim* - Writings) to compose (Ugwueye, 2019). The Wisdom literature of the Hebrews (*hokmah*), belongs to the section known as the Writings. The concept of wisdom is elusive because it is exceedingly complex (Murphy, 1977). Wisdom can stand for the skill of a craftsman, such as that possessed by those who made Aaron's vestments (Exodus 28: 3) or by carpenters who constructed the Mosaic Tabernacle (Exodus 31: 3-5; 36:1). It denotes the ability of a professional mourner (Jeremiah 9: 17) or a sailor (Psalm 107: 27). The sage is an adviser to kings (Jeremiah 50: 35; Proverbs 31: 1) but is also an astute old woman (2 Samuel 20: 16).

These many faces of wisdom cannot be captured in any logical scheme. In Drane's (1990) opinion, wisdom obviously is a term used simply to denote the possession of whatever abilities were necessary for a particular individual to be successful in their own sphere of life. For some, it means technical training in the art of international relations. Israel no doubt had schools attached to the royal courts where this kind of formal education was given. For others, it meant the study of science and philosophy, a sort of university education. But for most, it meant the cultivation of those personal qualities that would result in happy and meaningful relationships in the everyday life of home, workplace and the entire society.

Wisdom sayings are staggered all over the passages of the Hebrew scripture but the books categorized as the wisdom books are Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes or more properly called *Qoheleth* in Hebrew, Ecclesiasticus otherwise called Jesus ben Sira or Sirach in Hebrew and the Wisdom of Solomon. Some scholars also include the books of Psalms and Song of Songs in the list. According to Kidner (2017), wisdom is not confined to the books listed above. It covers a wider sphere of intellectual activity and also ambitious initiatives within the consolidated ancient courts. There are three dimensions of Israelite wisdom literature (Menezes, 2003). First, it is being reflected as secular and universal in character. The writers of this literature known as the sages or the wise men address themselves to the children of Adam (אֲנִי־אָדָם), that is to human beings as such, and not to the children of Israel (אֲנִי־יִשְׂרָאֵל) alone. Second, the Israelite wisdom at a point gradually began to be identified with the 'fear of God' or 'fear of Yahweh'. This classical formulation is to be found in the book of Proverbs: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (9:10). The last and final dimension of wisdom literature is reflected in its personification or hypostatization. It is now known as Dame Wisdom as contrasted with Dame Folly (Proverbs 1:20; 9:13). The rabbinic hypostatization of the Torah and the personification of wisdom identified with Christ in the Deutero-Isaiah and Pauline literature are to be understood in the same light (1 Cor 1:25; Col 1:27ff)

The biblical booklover who hops from the books of the Law and the Prophets to the wisdom books finds himself in a different world altogether. The reader of wisdom literature feels he has left the theocentric world of the law and the prophets and entered an anthropocentric world in which man and the 'good life' claim the center stage. Here, there ceases to be invectives against idolatry, no more talk about God, little about the Temple and divine worship, much about man, his character, his conducts, his foibles and failures. According to Boadt (1984) wisdom books differ among themselves in both style and subject matter, but they all have in common certain characteristics which set them off from other biblical books.

They have the following features - minimum interest in the great acts of divine salvation proclaimed by the Torah and the prophets; a questioning attitude about the problems of life (why is there suffering, inequality and death, and why the wicked prosper); a search for how to master life and understand how humans should behave before God; a great interest in the universal human experiences that affect all people and not just believers in Yahweh; an interest in discussion and treatment of man as man without any interest to race, possession, religion and birth; a joy in the contemplation of creation and God as the Creator, and little interest in Israel as a nation or in its history.

In Israel, Solomon is credited with the origin and embodiment of wisdom. Wisdom and Solomon are deeply connected. Wisdom is overburdened and excessively lauded. The other side of wisdom that portrays foolishness has not been stressed the same way wisdom is emphasized and this constitutes a problem gap in wisdom study. The truth of life is that wisdom coexists with foolishness and the relationship between the two in human nature is complex. It is the intention of this article to do a recap of the strengths and weaknesses of wisdom tuition in ancient Israel with a view to recommending them for guidance for individuals, modern families and other power centers. Wisdom provides practical guides for life and the pitfalls of foolishness that come with it serve as warning to people, especially to those who claim to be learned. The canonical hermeneutical framework of interpretation is used for the study

### **Ancient Near Eastern Origin of Wisdom Movement**

The roots of wisdom came from outside Israel. Long before the meeting of East and West in the Hellenistic empire founded by Alexander the Great (333 BC), the search for wisdom was carried on in the Fertile Crescent, especially in Egypt and Babylon (Anderson, 1978). In the same vein, Driver (1961) said that Edom was specially famed for wisdom alongside other nations (Obadiah 8, Jeremiah 49: 7). There is no doubt that a flourishing wisdom literature antedating that of Israel existed, not only in Egypt but in Arabia and in Mesopotamia. When Stephen in his discourse before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7: 22) said of Moses that he “was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians”, he merely made reference in no small measure to Egyptian wisdom literature. There was for example, the instruction of the Vizier (Arabic word for high ranking political adviser or minister) Ptah-hotep, a collection of wise sayings giving directives for a successful life, dating to about 2400 BC, approximately 1100 years before Moses.

There is also the instruction for king Meri-ka-re (C. 2200 BC), advice given by a king to his son and successor on how to rule successfully. There are similar collections for Amen-em-het (C. 1960 BC), for prince Hor-dedef (C. 2700 BC), and for Amen-em-opet about 1000 BC. According to Ellis (1977), that Israel knew the existence of this literature is attested by the statement of the book of 1 Kings (5: 10): “Solomon surpassed all the Cedemites and all the Egyptians in Wisdom”. Even more significant is the fact that the author of Job chooses for his hero a wise man who is from Uz. The same can be said of Job's friends Eliphaz from Teman, Bildad from Shuh, and Zophar from Naamath. Uz during the life time of Job seems to have initially occupied the north-western part of Arabia, sometimes identified with the kingdom of Edom.

The story of Job is set in the land of Uz, which classifies Job as a non-Israelite (a pretty shocking characteristic for a hero in the Hebrew Bible. The Babylonian Theodicy titled “I will praise the Lord of Wisdom”, a poem having the same theme of the suffering of the innocent like Job, written earlier before Job, is found in the Assyrian literature (Pritchard, 1950).

Wisdom literature entered Israel with the importation of Egyptian scribes by David to fill administrative positions in his new kingdom. Wisdom literature was fully baptized into Israel's historical faith, as evidenced by the identification of Torah and Wisdom (Rylaarsdam, 1946). It grew under the patronage of Solomon who married an Egyptian princess. He wrote three thousand proverbs and one thousand five hundred songs. Before the exile, the sages ranked as one of the three classes of communal leaders, the others being the priests and the prophets (Jeremiah 18: 18). Solomon was for wisdom what Moses was for the law and David for the psalms. Men of Hezekiah, king of Judah transmitted the proverbs of Solomon contained in chapters 25 – 29 (c/o Proverbs 25:1). This is an indication of the activity of the sages before the exile.

After the exile wisdom literature in Israel entered its golden age. This time prophecy was on the wane. The maxims and sayings of Solomon, Agur, Lemuel etc were gathered in the book of proverbs between 6<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC and provided the broad basis for the longer and more elaborate wisdom teaching of Jesus, ben Sirach. The wisdom literature dealing with the great problem of retribution was initiated by the author of Job in 6<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, continued by *Qoheleth* in 4<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, and brought to a happy conclusion towards the middle of the first century by the author of wisdom/wisdom of Solomon/Book of wisdom. Tobith, Baruch, and Daniel, all post exilic books, as well as a number of psalms betray close affinities with the wisdom literature.

Anderson (1978) at last surmised that the origin of Israel's wisdom movement is lost in the haze of the early oral tradition. Probably there was a vigorous wisdom movement among the Canaanites, from whom it was carried over into Israel in the period before the monarchy. The many affinities between the book of Proverbs and the *Ras Shamra* literature suggest that Israel did assimilate wisdom material from her Canaanite environment. Balaam, the Babylonian diviner (Numbers 22 - 24) was related in some sense to Israel's wisdom movement. Moreover, it is from the earliest period of Israel's oral tradition that we have proverb, the riddle (Judges 14: 14), and the fable (Judges 9: 8 - 15), all ancient types of oriental wisdom that were gradually integrated into Israel's heritage. In the same vein, Egyptian wisdom motifs have been detected in the Joseph stories.

Ancient Israel was but a tiny dot in the map of ancient near East and their late entry into the near East as wandering cattlemen compelled them to copy a lot of things from their already highly developed neighbours who had sophisticated civilization. Like the institution of Prophecy and other establishments, Israel borrowed the international wisdom practice but made it peculiarly Israelitish.

### **Strengths of Wisdom**

The strengths and advantages of wisdom are enormous. Wisdom provides the skill for survival. The skills of living in community, like the skills of survival, were incorporated in maxims or proverbs that supplied guidance for life. In the opinion of Mckenzie (1979), wisdom is the skill of living a human life, especially adapting oneself to other members of the community. When God appeared to Solomon in a dream and offered Solomon anything he would ask, Solomon asked for wisdom (1Kings: 3: 5-14). Solomon's wisdom in judgment was shown in the story of the two women and their infant ones (1 Kings 3: 16-28). Wisdom discerns what is in the heart. It is Solomon's known wisdom that assures David that Solomon would take care of David's enemies after David is dead (1Kings 2: 6,9). The wise men make wise sayings but their teaching had a practical aim: not only do they formulate maxims of conduct, but they appear also as moral advisers and as interested teachers in the education of the young ones (Driver, 1961)

Ancient kingdom courts could not be administered without a large staff of wise men called the scribes who prepared and preserved records in large quantities. Roland de Vaux (1961) argued very well that David's administration was modeled after the methods in Egypt. The scribes who possessed wisdom were the first professional learned men, the first to write and read literature, both religious and secular. Both in Israel and Egypt the scribes prepared collections of wise sayings, in Israel Solomon was their patron.

The greatest success of wisdom in Israel was the erection of the holy place under Solomon, the lover of wisdom. It remains the greatest achievement of any Israelite king. The Ark of the Covenant, the oldest symbol of the presence of the one God worshipped by all the tribes of the Israelite league was brought into Jerusalem by David, but Solomon provided and furnished the housing for the symbol of God's presence. The temple provided an important center for worship, sacrifice, pilgrimage and many other ritual practices.

No succeeding king of Israel or of Judah is reported to have engaged in trading with similar success like Solomon and this is attributed to his wisdom. Solomon made good use of Israel's position on

the commercial lanes of the ancient Near East. His relations with Tyre gave him access to sources and markets accessible only by sea. The horizon of his trade extended to the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt and Asia Minor. The impact of wisdom on Solomon's trading successes enabled him to make strategic decisions, effective negotiations and innovative solutions to issues. Queen Sheba's admiration for Solomon's wisdom is a case in point (1 Kings 10: 1-13).

Merchandizing demanded and very probably created a new skill. Writing and reading, it seems, were not devised to record poetry or religious myths or ritual texts in the first place, but to keep accounts. The ancient scribe was a specialist in a recondite art (Mckenzie, 1978). He seems to have been the first to be educated for a profession in a professional institution, called a school, staffed by proved members of the profession which he was learning. The scribe was not, however, the only professional who arose with civilization; there were also priests and diviners and sorcerers, professional experts in the world above and beyond; producers of luxuries such as jewelry and furniture and monumental building, which simpler cultures could not afford. The scribe, so to speak, possessed the basic skill upon which the whole civilized system depended. His own sophistication is clearly shown by his own wisdom and knowledge of his own importance.

Wisdom produced professional scribes and scribal schools that were the transmitters and preservers of the popular folk wisdom of the ancient Near East in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Canaan. The biblical book of Proverbs and the other wisdom books are such collections of popular wisdom in Israel that speaks to all aspects of life with undeniable timeless precision. That the modern Christians and other users of wisdom literature are able to read and study them is due to the achievement of wisdom and its authors. Scribal offices were found in the centers of power. These were the temples, royal palaces, and great mercantile establishments. From these centers came the documents which have survived: commercial records and accounts, religious myths and ritual books, direction for divinations and magic in terrifying quantities, and political records. These are the materials from which modern scholars write and reconstruct the history of the ancient Near East.

Wisdom here includes learning, again a specialization. Much of this learning is pseudo-learning to modern man. But the myths were serious efforts to make it possible for man to live in a world which often appears irrational. They were genuine attempts to establish good relations with higher powers. Magic and divination were, as far as we know, as serious an effort to cope with common problems as modern medicine and psychiatry.

Israelite wisdom followed the pattern obtained in the ancient Near East but the materials for the history of Israelite wisdom are less abundant than the materials from Egypt and Mesopotamia. Both Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom were secular, and areligious, not hostile to religion, but not considering religion a factor in the skills for living. Israelite wisdom added a new element, the belief in Yahweh. Because so much of Israelite wisdom was derived from ancient Near East, it is not always difficult to detect secular passages. For instance, many of the sayings in the book of Proverbs have no relation to Israelite religion or faith in God at all. Every atheist could agree with Proverbs 10: 4 "Lazy hands make a person poor, while active hands bring wealth". More passages like this abound in the same book of Proverbs – "He who loves correction loves knowledge but he who hates reproof is stupid" (12: 1); "He who meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the tail" (26: 17); "Bad, bad, says the buyer but once he has gone his way, he boasts" (20: 14); and "A man's gift makes room for him and brings him before great men" (18:

16). All these sayings have no revelations or words of God attached to them but they merit the highest qualities of realistic teaching that wisdom can afford.

In ancient times the young were foolish because they lacked experience; but they could not profit from personal experience unless they had the background of collective experience provided by wisdom, by which they could interpret personal experience. The basic wisdom was how to live successfully in the human community. This is the necessary wisdom which the young man in Proverbs is urged to learn from his parents. The basic wisdom was not taught by professionals. The sage was one who in addition to mastering the collective wisdom of the past was able to add to it by forming wise sayings of his own to teach the young ones. The young man is a fool by definition, and he can become wise only by learning from his elders. The wise men divide the world into two: the wise and the foolish. Once the youth has become an adult, they do not envisage a change from one class to the other.

Wisdom alone in Israel assured success in all one's enterprises. The wise men of ancient Israel believed that the wise man would not do wrong, not because it is wrong, but because it is foolish. In the world of the wise man *Qoheleth*, there is no profit in it. The wise man married a good wife, reared docile children to wisdom, and prospered in farming or merchandizing. A wise man is the transformed man. The great and truly important thing about a transformed man is that he has been equipped expressly for speaking against evil in the society (Ugwueye, 2004). According to McKenzie (1979), wisdom was the crown jewel in the king's diadem. Wisdom was not only the one sure thing in an uncertain world; it rendered an uncertain world certain. Its practical benefits and strength can be summarized in the examples below of how wisdom was perceived in Israel.

We are told that the counsel of Ahitophel, one of David's court advisers, was "as if one consulted God" (11 Samuel 16: 23). David was dismayed to hear that his chief adviser and wise man, Ahitophel, had gone over to his son's side in rebellion. Ahitophel's wisdom was so effective that David had to beg God to confuse Ahitophel's brainpower. David and Absalom, his son, considered Ahitophel's counsel as filled with prophetic power. During the same rebellion of Absalom against David, a wise woman from Tekoa, the home town of Amos, was summoned to use her wisdom to influence David (11 Samuel 14: 1 - 23), and later during the crisis another wise woman in her wisdom negotiated with Joab (11 Samuel 20: 14 - 22). The remark that the wise woman went to the people "in her wisdom" indicates that she was a recognized leader with professional standing. Wisdom was recognized as a gift of talent and vindicated by success.

The overall rich contents of different parts of wisdom are educating, refreshing and scintillating. Since the precepts of wisdom originated in the context of advice handed on from one generation to another, they have the good of the society at heart. The wisdom teachers in Israel spoke frankly and freely about relationships. It is in the art of relationship that a husband and wife grow together in conflict, unfaithfulness and quiet resolution (Ugwueye, 2015). For instance, a stable sexual union between husband and wife is seen as the key to family stability. Adultery is singled out as a particularly destructive evil whose repercussion affects more than the two individuals involved. The attractions and perils of sexual unfaithfulness are captured by the wisdom teachers 'A man can hire a prostitute for the price of a loaf of bread, but adultery will cost him all he has.' 'The lips of another man's wife may be as sweet as honey, and her kisses as smooth as olive-oil, but when it is all over, she leaves you nothing but bitterness and pain.' (Proverbs 6: 26; 5: 3-4).

According to Drane (1990), the teaching of the wisdom teachers are never narrow-minded and prudish. The love poems in the Song of Solomon have a number of connections with the wisdom books and the way they depict a developing sexual relationship often alarmed modern Christian readers by its frankness. For example “Your stature is like that of the palm tree and your breasts are like clusters of fruit. I said, I will climb the palm tree, I will take hold of the fruits” (7: 7-8). What we have in this book is a positive appreciation of human love in all its aspects, both psychological and physical, and there is no need to limit the function of the Song exclusively to a wedding ceremony as some scholars do (Menezes, 2003).

Apart from sexual relationships, wisdom had much to say about friends and neighbors. In practice, a friend can often be more valuable than members of the family: 'Do not forget your friends or your father's friends. If you are in trouble, don't ask your brother for help; a neighbor nearby can help you more than a brother who is far away.' Of course, in order to acquire friends we need to show ourselves to be friendly: 'Never tell your neighbor to wait until tomorrow if you can help him now.' We also need tact: “Let your foot be seldom in your neighbour's house, lest he become weary of you and hate you' (Proverbs 27: 10; 3: 28; 25: 17). Above all, a relationship between friends needs to be based on honesty: 'Like a mad man, who throws firebrands, arrows, and death, is the man who deceives his neighbour and says, “I am only joking”'(Proverbs 26: 18-19).

Gossip, then in Israel as now in Nigeria, was one of the commonest threats to wholesome friendship. Indeed the way people speak to each other is one of the major themes of the wisdom literature. A slogan in one of the chapters of Proverbs sums up 'Seven things that the Lord hates' – and most of them are related to the way people speak: 'A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that kill innocent people, a mind that thinks up wicked plan, feet that hurry off to do evil, a witness who tells one lie after another, and a man who stirs up trouble among friends' (26: 20; 6: 16-19).

Other parts of wisdom literature are as well entertaining and educating in no small measure, 'For who knows what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For who can tell man what will be after him under the sun?' Sometimes a man is given wealth but not the power to enjoy it: 'a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honour, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them; this is vanity; it is a sore affliction.'(Ecclesiastes 6: 12, 2).

It is a pity that many do not read the wisdom literature. It is one of the best teaching parts of the Bible and more related to daily practices of people. Reading the books of wisdom give clarity to the confused and provides understanding to the unknowledgeable. Wisdom books are good companions in time of depression and melancholy. Reading wisdom books provokes the mind to think and assess behaviors in the light of standards set by wisdom itself. Rarely could someone who regularly reads wisdom books be deceived for the wisdom of the wisdom books keeps one always on his guard. Truly much is achieved through reading the wisdom books.

### **Weaknesses of Wisdom**

The representation of wisdom in favourable light is crucial because wisdom is really significant in the society. But there are more to be said. The scripture lets its readers see a different far less attractive side to the picture, which makes it obvious that the Golden period of wisdom was not all gold.

The prophets were from time to time critical of wisdom (Jeremiah 8: 8-9; Isaiah 29: 14). Jeremiah for instance decried the lying pen of the scribes that, according to him, had turned the law of the Lord into a lie. For Mckane (1970), this is an indication that the wisdom movement was strong enough to warrant prophetic attack. By and large, scribal wisdom recognized the limits of its station in life, to enjoy its power without flaunting it. Job's critique of wisdom is based on the contradiction between traditional wisdom and experience, that very experience which the wise men professed was the only source of wisdom. In their theory about virtue and success they had rejected experience, which tells us that virtue does not always succeed and folly and wickedness do not always fail.

Readers of wisdom literature have often found it too speculative in utility thereby ignoring the actual evils experienced in our world (Ugwueye, 2014). They taught that virtue is its own reward, even if they never quite believed it. In original ancient Israelite belief, God was the ultimate cause of all things both good and evil, without denying man of his freedom and responsibility. Man could not, as he could in Mesopotamia, be a victim of demons or of a dispute between gods. Elementary justice demanded that God treat each man according to his own deeds. There could be no failure or pain in the life of a good man. This theory is proposed in an extreme form by the three friends of Job. Some interpreters think the theory is here being caricatured but this speculative maximum happiness theory seems to be implied in many of the wise sayings in the book of Proverbs, and this is a minus because utmost happiness exists not anywhere.

According to Israelite tradition, the gift of wisdom was bestowed in greatest measure upon Solomon, who was such a wise ruler that his fame for wisdom spread far beyond the boundaries of his empire. Mckenzie (1979) disputes this view saying that Solomon, as a carrier of wisdom, was rather a pompous fool. With wisdom God granted Solomon riches and glory, but Mckenzie asks – does not any fool know that it is wisdom which obtains riches and glory? It is not without reason that some think that this traditional wisdom is the mask of a fool. In the traditional wisdom the wise man could not fail unless he turned foolish. The attribution of wisdom literature to Solomon was due to the establishment of a royal scribal office by his father David. The administrative offices were modeled on the customs of foreign courts (Herrmann, 1975). Solomon inherited David's office and became a patron of wise men, which does not make him a wise man; instead Solomon's acts disparaged wisdom.

David and Solomon after him depended upon foreigners for the administration of the kingdoms. There was no Israelite model to which the gigantic temple and royal residence could be compared; the text tells us that Solomon had to hire foreign craftsmen, for the Israelite had never learned the skills of monumental building. The foreign workmen built a temple after a Canaanite model of which samples exist elsewhere in the ancient Near East. In Bright's (1967) view, the amphictyonic order was broken; the effective basis of social obligation was no longer Yahweh's covenant, but another foreign model. And this meant inevitably that in daily affairs covenant law lost much of its relevance.

In making Jerusalem the central place of worship with the positioning of the Ark there, David, the faith-informed politician, intended to subsume the covenant of Yahweh with Israel under the covenant of Yahweh with David. It is true Solomon built the temple, but how successful



wisdom was in guiding him could be seen from the unreserved readiness of the tribes of Israel to immediately abandon the king, the Ark and the temple under Solomon's successor.

Foreign trade during Solomon's time was a high risk and high profit undertaking; such undertakings have never been possible except for those who have enough capital to accept the risk. Solomon's wealth is described in certainly exaggerated terms in 1 Kings 10: 14–29. The reader will observe that most of the articles of trade mentioned were articles of luxury trade. Such articles have always been of prime concern in foreign trade. It is clear from this and from other indications that the wealth generated by wisdom in Solomon's trade did not seep down into the small towns and villages where the peasants and artisans lived. In short the poor had no access to such goods.

There were some other unwise political and social developments in the reign of Solomon which must be used to condemn wisdom if Solomon remained the architect of wisdom in Israel. Where David had been careful, to respect tribes and their ideals, to win their agreement to him as king, and to avoid favoring one section against another, Solomon aggressively did the opposite. He laid down new boundaries for provinces which split tribes apart, and he seemed to favor the ways of Canaanites and other foreigners over Israel's traditions (Boadt, 1984). Solomon undoubtedly sought to weaken tribal loyalties, to integrate the Canaanite population more thoroughly within the state, and to consolidate power more firmly in his own hands. The governors of the provinces were Solomon's appointees, responsible to an officer of his cabinet; two of them were his own sons-in-law.

The rise of a ruling landownership class started this period as David and Solomon rewarded their foreign administrators with donations of land. It is not clear how the land came into the royal domain but the ancient Israelite custom was to retain land in the family. The ruling class may have been those for whom Solomon, in his wisdom or foolishness, made gold as common as silver and silver as common as stones. They were the ruling class described with sarcasm by Amos (6: 3-7) and Isaiah (5: 8-14) two hundred years later.

Solomon never taxed the ruling class but overtaxed the poor citizens in order to feed and support the large bureaucracy he created (1 Kings 5: 2 - 3). Solomon went so far as to inaugurate the *corvee* (French word for obligatory unpaid labour) in Israel; labour gangs were levied and forced to work in relays in Lebanon felling timber for Solomon's building projects (1 Kings 5: 13). This was both a severe drain on manpower and a bitter dose for freeborn Israelites to swallow. Slaves manned the refinery at Eziongeber and the mines of the Arabah (working conditions there were so murderous that free labour would never have stood for them); the mortality rate must have been appalling.

The wise man and the representative of wisdom in Israel turned a foolish man when he became a tyrant who outdid even pagan kings in luxury of his lifestyle with a thousand wives and concubines. Hunt (1962) described this as exhibition of acts that betrayed the priceless deposit of wisdom. Solomon loved many foreign women: Egyptian, Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite (1 Kings 11). In this, he violated the Law of Moses about intermarrying with foreign peoples, but even worse, he built temples for all of their gods as they wished: to Chemosh, god of Moab, and to Moloch, god of Ammon, and others. It is on record that Solomon even performed rites for Astarte or Ashteroth, the goddess of Sidonians and Milcom (1 Kings 11: 15), the

abomination of the ammonites. According to Okwueze (2001), from 1 Kings 11 alone, it is clear how Solomon went in promoting the gods of other nations at the expense of Yahwism. In a nutshell, Igbo (2020) depicted Solomon as ensnared into idolatry by his innumerable foreign wives who were devotees of other gods.

It is often said that wisdom, of course the wisdom of Solomon, brought peace as that was the time when Israel made associations with the international world, when it became open to the spirit of the age: art and learning (wisdom). This happened only in Jerusalem and nowhere else. The spirit of Solomon's enlightenment and wisdom had its effect at the court; it also found its way in the Old Testament in the form of court history-writing, and increased the fame of the king. Nevertheless, this whole development must be seen in modest terms, within a small area and not even in one quarter of the nation. Herrmann (1973) in his summary analysis of Solomon's foolishness at this period said that 'it was so to speak a laborious conquest of the Province!' For Bright (1967), wisdom to some brought wealth; to others, slavery, but its price to all was an increase in the powers of the king and a burden quite without precedent in Israel.

The Hebrew words translated as 'wise' and 'wisdom' sometimes mean 'cleaver' or 'skillful' when they are applied to carpenters or goldsmiths. The breadth of the word is best seen when it is applied to the advice given by Jonadab to Absalom on how he may rape his sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13). Though the book of Samuel is not a wisdom book, but the Hebrew word 'counsel' or 'advice' in the passage is of wisdom in origin. The import of this is that the possessor of wisdom like Jonadab could deploy it to cause trouble. Likewise, Solomon manipulated wisdom to live a life of profligacy, create fame and personal wealth. He as well shortchanged, exploited and trampled on the poor and the needy of his time.

One of the weaknesses of wisdom is its attempt to control the cosmos and the destiny of individuals by reducing them to formulae. Wisdom degenerated into creating formula for wealth, success and happiness. Wisdom has failed to give man a purpose in life. The proverbial wise man enjoyed all the success which wisdom brings to the wise: building a luxurious palace, eating from golden dishes, and having a harem of a thousand women. Yet the life of the wise man was no richer than the meanest peasant, and this is not because the wise man was unable to purchase immortality. The *qoheleth*, being part of the wisdom literature, criticized the mainline thoughts of the wise men: death is merely the final seal on the futility of human existence. Wisdom is simply incapable of achieving or producing anything more than passing value.

The theory that wisdom assures success and happiness is essentially false. As far as success and happiness are concerned, the wise man is no better than the fool. Wisdom does not guarantee success and cannot remove the fallibility from human beings. As the Wisdom of Solomon led him astray, so did the wisdom of other wise men in ancient Near East fail them. For instance, Gilgamesh the king of Uruk in Mesopotamia, in Epic of Gilgamesh story, failed to achieve immortality in spite of wisdom. Egypt's bad foreign policy brought about the decline of Egypt during the reign of Amenhotep the third that had myriads of advisors and wise men around him. Sargon the Great's empire could not be saved from decline by the wise men in his courts. Such examples are many in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Persia

## **Conclusion**

Wisdom of ancient Near East was in fact just common sense and insight, but common sense is never common. It was part and parcel of a great international intellectual movement of the day that is often simply referred to as the wisdom movement. When the ancients spoke of wisdom they included all those elements in a person's character and upbringing that enable them to be a mature and successful member of society. Wisdom might have been a more intellectual pursuit than the moral advice that was evolved in the family and the village community. The sharing of wisdom by all cultures and as an international trait in the ancient Near East helps to explain why Israel's wise people, sometimes, gave a little attention to Israel's own private beliefs and dogma. They had joined the larger and more universal search for the meaning of life.

But in Israel, the family was the main influence in the life of a growing child. Wisdom has been taught the young by their elders since the human race started. Young people would learn what they needed to know from their parents, grandparents, and the village elders. The practice recommended in the book of Deuteronomy almost certainly continued through most of the Old Testament period: 'Never forget these command that I am giving you today. Teach them to your children. Repeat them when you are at home and when you are away, when you are resting and when you are working...' (6: 6-7). Teaching of wisdom should be a basic concern to every parent and elder in the family.

The imagery of the wisdom books may be less picturesque and dramatic than the words of the prophets, but their social perspective is remarkably similar. Many of the abuses condemned by the wisdom teachers were the same as those that caused so much concern to the prophets: dishonesty, corruption, bribery, unjust business practices etc - summed up in the slogan 'Better to be poor and honest than rich and dishonest' (Proverbs 11: 1; 15:27; 28: 6-8; 13: 23). On a positive note, the wisdom literature is full of instructions to those who are rich to share what they have with the poor (14: 21, 31; Job 31: 19-20). The wisdom books are concerned about social justice as a basic need of the society and they are conscious that it is usually the rich people that create division within the society. So they advocate a positive effort to correct social injustices: 'Speak up for people who cannot speak for themselves. Protect the rights of all who are helpless. Speak for them and be a righteous judge. Protect the rights of the poor and needy' (Proverb 30: 13-14; 31: 8-9). In the wisdom books we have much clear guidance on how Gods people and wise people should behave. It is strange that wisdom coexists with foolishness and even the wise men could fall prey to foolishness. The people holding Nigeria down today are men and women that received the best of training in parental, formal and informal, local and international wisdom education. An ordinary look, not critical one, at the activities of people who could be described as wise men or who possess wisdom in Nigeria is disturbing to every sane mind. Nigeria intellectuals, who are supposed to be the distinguished sages or exceptional wise men, are dishonest. They attended better institutions than their children, received better education, had better job opportunities but they have bequeathed a putrefying nation to the generations to come. The Catholic Christian Outlook newspaper in their September editorial, gave example below of the foolishness of wisdom with the electoral body of the nation, manned by a wise man selected from the group of the wisest.

Across the globe, professors and lecturers have carved out a very responsible and respectful niche for themselves, unarguably regarded as proponents and apostles of good governance and sagacious economic managers of the nation's commonwealth. Even in Nigeria, this revered and elevated

opinion was held of these egg heads whose theoretical and public pontifications and remonstrance have held many captive, as they are perceived as repositories and custodians of all knowledge and wisdom. But this lofty image on perception is no longer tenable in Nigeria.

A chain is as strong as its weakest link and Nigeria's political development depends majorly on the integrity of election officials, especially the electoral body chairman, who has always been selected from the group of professors. In 1993, Prof Humphrey Nwosu played a crucial role in conducting the freest and fairest election in the country. But the election of 2023 unconsciously elicited a sense of gotcha from majority of Nigerians who believe that the worst has happened to the country. Initially when the inhabitants of the ivory tower were drafted as leaders of the electoral body, Nigerians heaved a sigh of relief that a Daniel has come to judgment as the integrity and honesty of these eggheads are cotton candy (Madubuko, 2024).

Dishonesty of the wisest is the worst form of fraud; corruption of the best is the worst form of crookedness. Professors and university lecturers are not the only dishonest people in the country. Corruption cuts across all ranks and professions and all segments of the society are involved. The business men and women, civil servants and the politicians and, officers and men of security organizations, national Assembly members, hospital workers and most regrettably the trained and untrained clergy or 'men of God' as they call themselves etc are all involved. The activities of the hired bishops during the 'moslem-moslem' presidential ticket saga should not be forgotten in a hurry. When it comes to the issue of a wise person-turned foolish, we are all suspects, and no amount of denial can change this. Nigerians are desperate and greedy for the extra naira. Any man who is desperate and greedy is not trustworthy, and any man who accepts any condition to get anything cannot be counted as a wise man.

Sometimes the foolishness associated with wisdom could be found in creation. Genesis (8: 21) is related to wisdom when God considered the consequences of his actions and acknowledged humanity's propensity for evil. "And the Lord smelled a soothing aroma. Then the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done'" In the original Hebrew, the word inclination is *yetzer*, from the root יצר meaning to form.

It was originally applied to the shape of a ceramic vessel (Isaiah 29: 16) or to the physical body of a man (Psalm 103: 14; Deut 2: 7). It is the foundational form of man's heart to have evil inclinations. It is just human nature to be foolish and immoral. Sin is the predisposition of man's heart formation (*yetzer*), which was fashioned by the supreme creator, formulator (one who forms) or maker (*yotzer*). The knowledge of the formation (*yetzer*) made by the maker (*yotzer*) leaves man with no choice except to constantly and pointedly moderate the inclination of his heart as he acts in wisdom and foolishness towards people and receive actions from others in the family, working place, different groups and the entire society.

In continued attribution of foolishness to creation, wisdom itself (Ecclesiastes 7: 13) accuses God of being responsible for man's stupidity: 'No one can make straight what God has made crooked'. As said before, God is the author of good and evil in original Hebrew thought, without automatically stopping man from being responsible for his actions. God's sovereignty and control over creation is emphasized here. This may not go down well with some Christians who are ignorant of the fact that God is the author of good and evil in unique Hebrew thinking. Crooked

(Hebrew - עול) means twisting or perverting something; distortion or corruption. God's sovereignty and control over creation is not contestable. In the day of wisdom be joyful, but in the day of foolishness consider: "God has made the one as well as the other, so that man will not find out what will be after him" (Ecclesiastes 7: 14)

The discussion on wisdom and foolishness in human nature is as complex as human beings. The teaching of wisdom is peculiarly human and beneficial, but considering the opposite side of wisdom as witnessed, too, in the acts of human beings, especially the so called wise ones, we wonder whether human beings are far advanced in wisdom than animals. After all, animals also tutor their newborn. For instance, dogs teach their puppies how to hunt and protect their territories, reptiles coach their hatchlings how seek shelter, bask and hunt, fish as well teach their minnows how to feed, seek shelter and avoid predators.

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