

Terms associated with “wisdom” in the Old Testament

When the reader approaches the biblical text in search for wisdom, he at first will notice that there exists a rather large range of semantic terms associated with the idea of wisdom, though not necessarily translated as such. Wahlen gives his reader a breakdown of these terms, exemplified in Proverbs 1:1-7, as cognitive, rhetorical, and moral terminology.¹ Associated with cognitive wisdom, one will find the words "wisdom" (חֵכְמָה), "instruction" (מוֹסֵר), "understanding" (בִּינָה), "shrewdness" (עֵרְמָה), "knowledge" (דַּעַת), "skill" (תְּחֻבּוּלָה), "prudence" (מִזְמָה), and "fear of the LORD" (יְרֵאָה יְהוָה). As rhetorical terminology the reader is offered "saying" (מִשְׁלָל), "figure" (מְלִיצָה), and "riddle" (חִידָה). Finally, the moral terminology associated with biblical wisdom is "righteousness" (צֶדֶק), "justice" (מִשְׁפָּט), and "equity" (מִישְׁרִים). To work beyond Wahlen's scope of Proverbs 1:1-7, additional terms associated with biblical wisdom can be found, including “counsel” (עֵצָה; e.g., Prov 8:14), “sound wisdom” (תוֹשִׁיָּה; e.g., Prov 8:14), “understanding” (שִׂכְלָה; e.g., 1Chron 22:12), and “wise” (חָכָם); perhaps these terms could be added to the cognitive terminology mentioned above.

Of all of the words associated with biblical wisdom, as mentioned above, one stands out more than the rest as a special use of the “biblical wisdom” idea, חֵכְמָה² – indeed it is used of the “gift” of wisdom given to Solomon by God (1Kgs 4:29 [5:9 in MT]). In order to understand this special use, though, it is vital first to understand its technical use.

¹ Clinton Wahlen, “Wisdom, Greek,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (InterVarsity Press, June 2008), 844.

² Note that TWOT lists that the word and its cognates occur about three-fifths of the time in Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes – the Wisdom Literature. Also note that the word itself occurs more than half of the time in the same books. When speaking of biblical wisdom terminology, this is the one representative example to study.

In the Pentateuch, the term is associated with special skill-sets, including making religious garments (Ex 28:3) and spinning goat's hair (Ex 35:26). Perhaps the gist of the idea can be taken from Exodus 35:35 which associates חֲכָמָה with engraving, designing, embroidering, preparing colored materials, working with fine linen, weaving, and the “craftsmen in all the work” (NET). Beyond this, the term is associated with the more general craftsmanship (cf. Ex 31:3 where חֲכָמָה is juxtaposed to understanding, knowledge, and craftsmanship). Outside the Pentateuch, in 1 Kings 7:14, the reader will find a man who was filled with “חֲכָמָה and understanding and skill for doing any work in bronze.” No doubt, this is why so many authors associate חֲכָמָה with “skill.”³

Throughout much of the early historical books, this word is associated with the technical, cognitive sense of “wisdom,” especially in regards to Solomon. As this is in fact the sense at issue, this author wonders how much of this cognitive “wisdom” has to do with technical skill.

One example of Solomon's חֲכָמָה that may have a cognitive “skill” is found in 1 Kings 5:26 where Solomon was given חֲכָמָה by God resulting in a peace between Hiram and Solomon. This political skill (this shrewdness, cunning) was then sought by different individuals outside of Israel (e.g., queen of Sheba), and it is said that Solomon's חֲכָמָה was greater than the חֲכָמָה of Egypt or the east (1Kgs 4:30) – giving this word some relevance outside of the community of believers.⁴ Perhaps one way to express the difference between physical, technical skills and

³ cf. Tremper Longman, “Fear of the Lord,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (InterVarsity Press, June 2008), 201; Alan Millard, “Sages, Schools Education,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (InterVarsity Press, June 2008), 704; Daniel J Estes, “Wisdom and Biblical Theology,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (InterVarsity Press, June 2008), 854; Jamie Grant, “Wisdom and Covenant,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (InterVarsity Press, June 2008), 861.

⁴ The use of חֲכָמָה for non-Israelite wisdom does not pose a problem for the logic of this present argument. As will be explained shortly, there is a difference between secular cognitive wisdom used simply in the sense of

purely cognitive skills as seen above would be to do as HALOT has done and simply call it “shrewdness,”⁵ as seen not only in this political sense here but also in 1 Kings 2:6 and Isaiah 10:13; additionally, the prudent woman of 2 Samuel 20:22 quickly cut off the head of a man בְּחָכְמָתָהּ (that is, “in her wisdom”) rather than displeasing the mighty general Joab. Because of all of these, Lucas (citing Whybray) suggests *life-skill*: “the ability of the individual to conduct his life in the best possible way and to the best possible effect.”⁶

Based on Solomon’s gift and passages like Ecclesiastes 1:16, the reader can understand that חָכְמָה is some sort of skill that can be increased. This idea is also seen in the Pentateuchal skill-sets from earlier, including the endowment of חָכְמָה (Ex 28:3; Ex 31:3, 6; etc.). From these, it appears that this skill of “wisdom” is something that can be gained, but it is also something given by God – thus the beginning of a religious context.

It is in Proverbs 1:1-7 where this idea of a religious life-skill plays out in the wisdom sense, as 1:2 expresses the idea that the purpose of the book of Proverbs includes the *gaining* of חָכְמָה and its synonym, “instruction” (מוֹסֵר). This parallel word מוֹסֵר is then explained as “skillful living” in Verse 3 when used in conjunction with another of the “wisdom” terminology (מוֹסֵר הַשְׂכִּיל). How is this skillful living carried out? The Proverbs 1 passage continues with three adverbial accusatives of manner, describing just how “skillful living” is carried out,

shrewdness (cf., 2 Sam 13-19 where several characters show “shrewdness” in their actions, some negatively) and that of a religious sense. As the word had meaning before the Law, that meaning is carried into the period of the Law, but a special sense appears – a religious sense – as will be seen shortly. Therefore this argument is not to claim religious exclusivity of the sense of the word.

⁵ HALOT, s.v. חָכְמָה, BibleWorks 6.0.009i (BibleWorks, 2003).

⁶ Ernest Lucas, “Wisdom Theology,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (InterVarsity Press, June 2008), 902.

namely: "righteousness" (צֶדֶק), "justice" (מִשְׁפָּט), and "equity" (מִיֶּשֶׁרִים) – linking cognitive wisdom with a result of moral wisdom.

If there is just one representative example of wisdom and most of the terms associated with it, this Proverbs 1:1-7 passage is it. Besides the ever important 1) learning wisdom and moral instruction and 2) receiving moral instruction in skillful living mentioned above, the wisdom of Proverbs (according to these opening verses) is meant 3) to impart shrewdness and a discerning path and 4) to discern the meaning of a proverb, parable, sayings of the wise, and riddles.

This short study of the terminology of wisdom is not meant to be exhaustive, but from this it should be clear that wisdom in some sense 1) involves a skill, 2) can be increased, and 3) can be endowed by God. Also, 4) biblical wisdom⁷ is meant to guide the receiver into what can be labeled as the theme of the book of Proverbs, learning to fear of LORD. This, ultimately, makes biblical wisdom a life-skill – learning how to live in conjunction with God's Word by God's grace.

⁷ This is in contrast to "worldly wisdom" as seen in 1 Kg 5:10 (speaking of Egypt's wisdom), Is 47:10 (speaking of Babylon's wisdom), and Jr. 49:7 (speaking of Edom's wisdom). As noted previously, חָכְמָה is not limited to Israel. What is limited to Israel is its association with the fear of the LORD as will be seen in the next section of this paper.