**For Counsel Shall not Perish from the Wise:**

**Jeremiah’s Attitude toward Wisdom and Sages**

Is there Wisdom in the book of Jeremiah? The very question makes a number of assumptions that we should first clarify. What is the meaning of the words “Wise” and “Wisdom”? Was there even a distinct Wisdom tradition, with clear membership criteria? Is Wisdom a genre? A category? A mode? If we assume that the answer is yes, can we isolate elements of the Wisdom tradition within a literature that is not explicitly defined as belonging to that tradition, such as prophetic literature or historiography? Furthermore, would such elements necessarily be authentic, that is, originating with the prophet, or are we dealing with later additions — a common phenomenon in the book of Jeremiah — that in this case were influenced by conceptions from the Wisdom tradition? In this lecture, I will attempt to investigate the relationship between Wisdom and Jeremiah from a new angle, one that will provide an answer to a number of these questions.

Defining Wisdom is a complicated endeavor with a long scholarly history, including the recent and important article by Will Kanes addressing the various difficulties in providing such a definition. With this caveat in mind, I believe that the definition itself, though originally formulated by 19th century scholars, is a useful one, reflecting the substantial affinities between books assigned to the genre of Biblical Wisdom literature: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. Many scholars have tried to articulate what underlies the scholarly intuition that *something* binds these books together, and thereby justify grouping them together in a single category. In my opinion, the starting point must be the self-definition of the speakers in these books, who define themselves as *chachamim*: wise men or sages. These wise men propose the existence of a cosmic law undergirding the natural order and teach that if one aligns his behavior with this law, it will earn him a good life. Based on the speakers’ self-definition as wise men and the intensive engagement in their books with the subject of Wisdom — its abilities, its limits, and the like —we can conclude that human wisdom is not merely one theme among many, but instead the foundation of their conclusions.

The speakers’ self-identification as wise men is significant for the topics addressed in these books, such as the understanding of the cosmic law by human means. Divine-human relations are also treated through this prism: Can a human being understand the laws through which God acts? It seems that the book of Proverbs, in most of its sections, provides a positive answer to this question. The books of Ecclesiastes and Job debate the assumption that a mortal can understand the cosmic order, question it, and challenge it. Revelation, in the few cases in which it is mentioned in Biblical Wisdom literature, is presented as an alternative, to be employed when human ability falls short, and its appearance is frequently accompanied by the limits of human comprehension; but these few cases are the exceptions that prove the rule. Revelation is not a primary medium in these books, in stark contrast to its importance and centrality in the rest of the Bible. Many other criteria listed by scholars as characterizing these three books are derived from this fundamental feature, including universalism, the individual appeal, an emphasis on ethical behavior, and others.

This definition of Wisdom — the explicit treatment, central to a given work, of human wisdom and its limits — can be the starting point for a discussion of the connection to Wisdom in a literature that does not clearly belong to the genre. Passages treating Wisdom are especially salient in genres in which revelation is the primary mode, such as prophecy. In such a case, we encounter a tension that raises the question of the relationship between Wisdom and revelation. I do not intend to say that all references to these questions identify a passage as belonging to the Wisdom tradition. However, through identifying such passages and analyzing their relationship to human wisdom, we can evaluate their composers’ proximity to concepts from the Wisdom tradition. In addition to drawing support from the thematic discussion, to which I will return shortly, my scholarly conclusions rest on semantic and stylistic arguments; there, I will attempt to discern whether or not these characteristics fulfill the same function as they do in Wisdom literature.

We return, then, to the question with which we began: Is there Wisdom in the book of Jeremiah? In order to answer this question, we will consider those passages in which the prophet refers to wise men and their ability to arrive at meaningful insights. These insights primarily concern the realm of divine-human relations; as Jeremiah declares in most of his prophecies referring to Wisdom and the wise, wisdom that does not encompass the fear of God is worthless. We cannot discuss all such prophecies, so I will focus on a number of salient examples. I will first address the prophecies of doom, from the same epistemological angle, and attempt to define Jeremiah’s conception of human wisdom. In the next section of the lecture, I will attempt to prove that the prophecy of the new covenant addresses these same epistemological questions, and that the conception of human wisdom reflected there stems from an internal development within the book of Jeremiah.

In chapter 5, verses 21 through 25, Jeremiah criticizes the people for their foolishness:

שִׁמְעוּ־נָא זֹאת עַם סָכָל וְאֵין לֵב עֵינַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יִרְאוּ אָזְנַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יִשְׁמָעוּ. הַאוֹתִי לֹא־תִירָאוּ נְאֻם־יְהוָֹה אִם מִפָּנַי לֹא תָחִילוּ אֲשֶׁר־שַׂמְתִּי חוֹל גְּבוּל לַיָּם חָק־עוֹלָם וְלֹא יַעַבְרֶנְהוּ וַיִּתְגָּעֲשׁוּ וְלֹא יוּכָלוּ וְהָמוּ גַלָּיו וְלֹא יַעַבְרֻנְהוּ. וְלָעָם הַזֶּה הָיָה לֵב סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרֶה סָרוּ וַיֵּלֵכוּ׃ וְלֹא־אָמְרוּ בִלְבָבָם נִירָא נָא אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַנֹּתֵן גֶּשֶׁם וְיֹרֶה וּמַלְקוֹשׁ בְּעִתּוֹ שְׁבֻעוֹת חֻקּוֹת קָצִיר יִשְׁמָר־לָנוּ׃

In this prophecy, the people are called “foolish,” a label characteristically used in Wisdom literature to identify a negative individual, that is to say, someone who is ignorant, because he does not use his senses to internalize the greatness of God and to fear Him. We see the prophet here adopting the primary method of Wisdom: learning through experience. He expects the people to fear God as a result of their contemplation of nature, especially the natural law operating within it. Such contemplation is aimed in this prophecy at arriving at theological insights, a combination that is as typical of the prophetic style as speaking in the first person in the name of God and using such expressions as “thus says YHVH.”

The next passage in which the prophet refers to the wisdom of the people is found in chapter 8. In this passage, the prophet declares to the people that wisdom unaccompanied by heeding the word of YHVH is worthless. If we consider these two passages together, we can conclude that, in Jeremiah’s worldview, wisdom can indeed result from the contemplation of nature and from reason, but it ultimately flows from a divine source, without which the wise are not worthy of the name. This conception introduces a characteristically prophetic element into the epistemological discussion.

Jeremiah’s critique of wisdom and the wise is particularly dominant in chapter 9. The chapter is divided into passages replete with the key words “wisdom,” “learn”, and “know.” The first passage addresses the lies and deceit that have spread among the people. The intended irony of this passage arises from the contrast between the people’s skill at learning how to deceive one another and their ignorance of God: their learning is dedicated to “train[ing] their tongues to speak falsely” and not to learning about God. In the next passage, the wise men are presented as worthless, because they cannot answer the most important question: What brought about the loss of their land? The third passage calls for the dirge-singers to sing laments over the benighted people, but the unusual characterization of the dirge-singers contains a sharp critique of the wise and their wisdom: in the only such usage in the Bible, the dirge-singers are here referred to as “wise women,” and are called to hear the word of YHVH and learn the art of lamentation. The sole form of wisdom that carries any benefit is the wisdom of the dirge-singers, who, in contrast to the wise men, heed the word of YHVH. The final passage in the unit negates the vainglory of wisdom, along with that of might and wealth, claiming that the only wisdom of any value is the knowledge of YHVH. In these passages, the prophet does not deny the human potential to acquire knowledge of God. In fact, this passage, like others in the book of Jeremiah, calls on the people to become wise and to come to know YHVH. The emphasis is on the results: wisdom that does not lead to knowledge of YHVH is not a wisdom worthy of glory.

To summarize our discussion so far on Jeremiah’s prophecies of doom, we can say that Jeremiah promotes a nuanced position on the fundamental question of the Wisdom tradition regarding the source of wisdom and its limits:

1. Jeremiah expresses faith in the human ability to acquire knowledge of YHVH, and even calls on the people to contemplate the laws of nature as a means of acquiring the fear of God.
2. He identifies knowledge of YHVH as genuine wisdom, which anyone claiming wisdom must and can acquire. This equation of wisdom with a relationship to God finds expression in definitions of the divine-human relationship as part of the laws of nature, a phenomenon that I will not be able to address at length in this lecture.
3. The prophet believes that wise men who do not listen to the word of YHVH are not fit to be called wise. In doing so, he maintains a nuanced position regarding the epistemological question of the source of wisdom: wisdom can indeed result from the contemplation of nature and from reason, but it also contains a divine element.
4. The prophet expresses disappointment over the fact that the people does not use their wisdom to acquire knowledge of YHVH, and, in his disappointment, calls the people “foolish” and “stupid.”

I will now turn to the prophecy of the new covenant, which expresses a different conception of the human ability to acquire knowledge of YHVH, which, as we saw above, is true wisdom in Jeremiah’s eyes. The prophecy of the new covenant does not explicitly refer to wise men, but it is replete with didactic expressions addressing epistemological questions, to an extent not found in parallel prophecies on the renewal of the covenant. An analysis of the prophecy through this prism has multiple applications, some of them relevant to a comparative analysis of the Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic tradition, as Bernd Schipper has shown. I will take a different approach here and attempt to show, through a comparison to Jeremiah’s prophecies of doom, that the prophecy expresses a new phase in Jeremiah’s relationship to Wisdom.

‏הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְכָרַתִּי אֶת־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־בֵּית יְהוּדָה בְּרִית חֲדָשָׁה׃ ‎לֹא כַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתִּי אֶת־אֲבוֹתָם בְּיוֹם הֶחֱזִיקִי בְיָדָם לְהוֹצִיאָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר־הֵמָּה הֵפֵרוּ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי וְאָנֹכִי בָּעַלְתִּי בָם נְאֻם־יְהוָה׃ ‎כִּי זֹאת הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר אֶכְרֹת אֶת־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל אַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים הָהֵם נְאֻם־יְהוָה נָתַתִּי אֶת־תּוֹרָתִי בְּקִרְבָּם וְעַל־לִבָּם אֶכְתֲּבֶנָּה וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם לֵאלֹהִים וְהֵמָּה יִהְיוּ־לִי לְעָם׃‏ וְלֹא יְלַמְּדוּ עוֹד אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו לֵאמֹר דְּעוּ אֶת־יְהוָה כִּי־כוּלָּם יֵדְעוּ אוֹתִי לְמִקְטַנָּם וְעַד־גְּדוֹלָם נְאֻם־יְהוָה כִּי אֶסְלַח לַעֲוֹנָם וּלְחַטָּאתָם לֹא אֶזְכָּר־עוֹד׃

The innovation of this covenant lies not in the conditions of the covenant itself, but rather in its impress in the people’s hearts. In contrast to the “old” covenant, which was written on tablets of stone and required constant study, in this covenant God will inscribe the Torah directly on their hearts. In contrast to earlier prophecies of Jeremiah, in which the people is supposed to acquire knowledge of YHVH, here God takes the initiative, such that human study is now superfluous. What occasioned this change in the new covenant? It seems this question can be answered through an examination of various motifs in the prophecies of doom that also appear in the prophecy of the new covenant. Take, for example, the motif of the covenant being inscribed on the people’s hearts, which also appears in 17:1:

חַטַּאת יְהוּדָה כְּתוּבָה בְּעֵט בַּרְזֶל בְּצִפֹּרֶן שָׁמִיר חֲרוּשָׁה עַל־לוּחַ לִבָּם וּלְקַרְנוֹת מִזְבְּחוֹתֵיכֶם׃

Inscription on the heart appears in two places in the book of Proverbs. In both instances, the wise teacher orders his student to write his instruction and his commands on his heart, as a metaphor for remembering and implementing his teachings. This metaphor befits the Wisdom context: in his historical setting, the teacher would generally order his student to write his words on a tablet or a scroll as a memory aid, and the metaphor demanding inscription on the heart underscores the demand on the student to remember his teacher’s instructions. It seems, then, that the original context for the metaphor is found in the Wisdom tradition, and Jeremiah borrowed it from this context for his own use. Aside from their shared use of this metaphor, however, the two prophecies are quite different. The first difference is in the content of what is written: in the prophecy of doom, it is “Judah’s sin” that is inscribed on the heart, an image that expresses the profound internalization of the sin. In contrast, the new covenant describes a situation in which it is the Torah that will be inscribed on the heart in such a way that it cannot be erased, while at the same time God promises “I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sins no more.”

An additional difference lies in the identity of the one doing the inscribing. Jeremiah 17 does not state explicitly who that is, but from the context it seems that it is the people who engraved the sin on their own heart: the people take the role of the student. In contrast, in the prophecy of the new covenant it is God who inscribes, just as He performs the other roles in the new covenant — placing the Torah among the people and forgiving their sins. We find that God fulfills both roles in the metaphor: that of the teacher delivering his instruction and that of the student who copies down his teacher’s words. As such, God expropriates from the people the role of the student, completely removing their agency. Employing the same motif as the earlier prophecy, then, provides the background for the innovation in the new covenant: when the task of inscription on the heart was in the people’s hands, they inscribed their sin; now, the task will be in God’s hands, and it will be the Torah, not the sin, that is inscribed on the heart.

The change in Jeremiah’s view of human wisdom is particularly striking when we compare the prophecy of the new covenant to the prophecy we saw above from chapter 9, verses 1 through 5. The two passages have a number of terms in common: “learn,” “knowledge of YHVH,” “man and his fellow,” and “man and his brother.” As we saw earlier, the relationship between learning and knowledge in chapter 9 creates the irony: what was learned was deceitful speech, and the result is that the people does not know YHVH. In contrast, in the prophecy of the new covenant, learning is supposed to lead to knowledge of YHVH, but there will be no further need for it, since God will write the Torah directly on the heart. The choice to present the learning as taking place between “a man and his fellow” or “a man and his brother,” and not between parents and children or teachers and students, reinforces the parallelism in the two passages, since it deviates from the common motif as found in the Bible and outside of it. Given this background, I would suggest that the reason for the transfer of the instruction that leads to knowledge of YHVH from the people to God is connected to the failure of the instruction described in the prophecy of doom. Since instruction, when in mortal hands, does not lead to knowledge of YHVH but rather deceit, knowledge of YHVH is placed in God’s hands, and only in this way can it be placed in the heart of the people. The view of human wisdom expressed in this prophecy is not unrelated to the view of human wisdom in the book’s prophecies of doom; it seems rather to be a natural development resulting from the prophet’s disappointment in the conditions that brought about the destruction. As we saw, Jeremiah maintains a nuanced position regarding the epistemological question of the source of knowledge: on the one hand, he recognizes the human ability to arrive at meaningful insights, sometimes through contemplation of the laws of nature; on the other hand, he believes that true wisdom includes heeding the word of YHVH. Jeremiah’s critique addresses these two points: the people do not use their human potential to know YHVH, which is true wisdom in his eyes, and instead glory in their own wisdom while refusing to heed the word of YHVH. The prophet expresses his disappointment by calling the people “foolish” and “stupid” and dismissing their claim to wisdom. The prophecy in chapter 31 articulates the results of that disappointment: the source of wisdom, that is, knowledge of YHVH, is now God Himself, such that there will be no further need for human learning — which has only failed. The people, “from the least of them to the greatest,” can come to knowledge of YHVH — not through human methods but instead through divine inscription.

To conclude: an investigation of the passages in which Jeremiah refers to wisdom through the prism of epistemology can locate his conception of wisdom and wise men within the intense discussion of Wisdom in the Biblical Wisdom books. Jeremiah here promotes ideas that are frequently thought to have come late in Wisdom literature, including the identification of wisdom with the proper relationship to God and the negation of the human potential to acquire this knowledge. Analyzing the connections between the prophecy of the new covenant and previous prophecies from the book of Jeremiah itself, along with tracing the development of the prophet’s conception of wisdom in the book, allows us to conclude that, as early as the sixth century BCE, such a nuanced conception of wisdom already existed. I would speculate that this development was the result of the unique integration of ideas from the Wisdom tradition with prophetic conceptions from the book of Jeremiah, although such a claim requires further study.

Thank you very much.