**Between Divine and Human Wisdom:**

**The Question of the Origin of Wisdom in Biblical and Post-Biblical Wisdom Literature**

An epistemological question lies at the core of the Wisdom tradition: What is the origin of human wisdom? Are an individual’s insights the result of exertion and labor, or is divine revelation the only source of valuable insights? Can every individual attain wisdom, or are only God’s chosen few blessed with insight? The ability to understand the laws that undergird the cosmos is clearly a divine attribute, ascribed to the creator; but it is also what separates man from beast—the attribute that allows human beings to act wisely and to win success and prosperity.

Biblical Wisdom literature deals intensively with the question of whether the source of wisdom is human or divine. Proverbs, which belongs to didactic, practical genre of Wisdom literature, presents wisdom as a supremely lofty attribute, and most sections of the book assume that it is within the reach of every individual who invests effort to attain it. In contrast, Job and Ecclesiastes, which belong to genre of speculative wisdom, cast doubt on the standing of human wisdom and an individual’s ability to understand the laws of the cosmos without divine assistance. These books too, however, give a central role to human wisdom and the human aspiration to understand the world.

Sages in the post-biblical period continued to consider the question of the origin of wisdom. However, in apocryphal Wisdom literature of the period (the end of the third century through the second century BCE) the divine source of wisdom occupies a much larger place than in biblical Wisdom literature. In Ben Sira, for example, the sage is a kind of prophet who receives his wisdom from God. Even more so, wisdom is completely identified with the divine Torah; the sage is no longer a man who comprehends the secrets of human existence, but rather one who is adept in that Torah. A further element that develops in post-biblical Wisdom literature, especially among the Dead Sea sect, is esoteric wisdom that is fed by knowledge from a divine source, which is passed down among the circles of the sages and is not shared with the wider community. This knowledge includes, among other things, the secret of the correct interpretation of the Torah and eschatological knowledge.

How can we explain the gap between biblical and post-biblical conceptions regarding the nature and source of wisdom? Can we locate the seeds of later notions in the biblical conceptions? And do later conceptions entirely deny the human ability to attain Wisdom, or do they still leave space for human reason? These questions lie at the heart of the proposed project. I will seek to uncover the relation between human and divine wisdom in biblical and post-biblical texts, to clarify the relationship between these works, and to investigate potential influences on the different conceptions of the question of the source of wisdom.

The classical approach proposed an internal development in the biblical Wisdom tradition: from practical wisdom, which focused on the individual and his abilities, to theological wisdom, which identified the source of wisdom with God and cast doubt on the individual’s ability to attain meaningful insights without divine intervention. Recently, there has been an increasing tendency in the scholarship to reject the developmental theory, and instead to reinforce the claim that multiple approaches were adopted simultaneously by the authors of various Wisdom texts and are not contradictory. A few scholars have even called for the abandonment whole cloth of the distinctions between wisdom and revelation, claiming that the sages themselves did not make such divisions and saw both revelation and human reason as acceptable means to arrive at wisdom.

However, a thorough consideration of the concept “wisdom” as it is used in the works themselves proves that we should not abandon the distinction between human and divine wisdom; on the contrary, we should develop and refine it. For instance, the term “wisdom” sometimes indicates intellectual ability and sometimes the content of the knowledge itself. Moreover, within the category “revelation” we should distinguish between the definition of the Torah as wisdom that is available equally to all (according to Deuteronomy) and theophany intended for outstanding individuals alone. An additional important distinction is between the “fear of God,” often presented in biblical Wisdom literature as the foundation of wisdom itself, and “Torah” on the one hand and “theophany” on the other. The proposed project will include a revised and more precise mapping of both human and divine Wisdom as a necessary foundation for the understanding of the relationship between the categories in various Wisdom texts.

At the center of the project will be a comparison of the biblical book of Proverbs, the clearest example of didactic Wisdom in the Bible, with the Septuagint translation and Ben Sira. On its face, the Septuagint version of Proverbs is meant to reflect the Hebrew text. However, as research has demonstrated, the translator does not always adhere to the literal meaning of the biblical source, and his work can be considered an interpretation that reflects his own outlook. A careful examination of the Greek translation of those verses touching on the question of the origin of wisdom can thus be incredibly informative regarding the gap between the approach of the biblical author of Proverbs (whose work is dated approximately to the fifth century BCE) and that of the Hellenized Jewish translator/interpreter (whose work is dated to the third to second century BCE). The connection between Ben Sira (composed in the second century BCE) and Proverbs is also well established. This study will examine Ben Sira’s citations of or allusions to Wisdom teachings from Proverbs, and will point to the differences between Ben Sira and the biblical original it’s author was consulting, which reflect changing positions on the question of the origin of wisdom. The study will examine whether there are differences between the Hebrew version of the book, which has only come down to us in fragmentary form, and the complete Greek version regarding the question under discussion, and will also propose an explanation for these differences.

The focus on two Jewish works that clearly relate to Proverbs, the Septuagint translation of the book and the two versions of Ben Sira, will enable a comparison between the concepts expressed there, the clear identification of the transition point between the biblical and post-biblical conceptions, and will serve as a firm foundation for future studies of other biblical and post-biblical texts.

In my doctoral dissertation, I examined a different aspect of the relation between human and divine wisdom: Jeremiah’s criticism of the wisdom of the sages. This book is classified as part of the prophetic genre, the essential medium of which is divine revelation, and, on that account, it firmly tackles the question of the status of human wisdom. In the book’s prophecies of doom, the prophet relates positively to the human ability to attain theological insight, but criticizes the people, who he claims do not fulfill their inherent potential. The prophet’s feeling of despair at the sages increases by degrees until, in the end, in the prophecy of the “new covenant” (31:31-34), he conclusively denies human learning as a way of attaining knowledge of God. The thesis identified the changing approaches to human wisdom in this text based on divine revelation, and the historical background for this change. In the project proposed here, I will turn to human and divine knowledge from within the Wisdom tradition itself, and attempt to analyze the different voices echoing in this debate and their possible causes.

The proposed study will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Naphtali Meshel of the departments of Bible and Religious Studies at the Hebrew University. It touches on the most fundamental question in the world of the sages: the question of the limits of their abilities qua sages; in effect, a question of their self-definition and that of their roles. The focus on such a critical point in the intellectual history of Judaism, between the Bible and rabbinic literature, will shed light on the development of the figure of the sage and on sages’ changing self-conception at decisive stages in Jewish history: from the elders standing at the gates of the city, to the royal advisers in the First Temple period, to the scholars of the Torah in the Second Temple Period.