**Wisdom Sayings in the Book of Jeremiah and their Role in the Book’s Prophetic Schema**

**Doctoral Thesis Abstract**

This thesis deals with passages in the Book of Jeremiah relating to wisdom. It seeks to identify and analyze the sections of book containing a concentration of motifs related to the wisdom literature tradition, and determine these motifs’ nature and purpose in context. Using philological and literary analysis, the thesis reveals Jeremiah’s close relationship with the wisdom tradition, as well as the prophet’s creative and intelligent use of the tradition’s constituent elements. The thesis makes clear that Jeremiah’s use of wisdom exhibits a distinct religious dimension, one which increases over the course of his prophecies, beginning with a partial acceptance of wisdom-related concepts and an expression of belief in human wisdom, and concluding with a rejection of the necessity of human learning in the impending new covenant and a designation of God as the sole source of knowledge. The encounter between the prophetic tradition and wisdom literature tradition within the book provides a unique window onto the perception of wisdom in the sixth century BCE, as well as the various attitudes to the integration of practical/human wisdom with a religious wisdom characterized by a profound reliance on God.

The introduction discusses a number of the fundamental assumptions undergirding this thesis. The first is a reassertion of the validity of wisdom as a core biblical genre, as can be clearly seen in the Biblical books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. The discussion in this section relies on the testimony of the books themselves, which are the only three in the Bible to define their speakers as sages and present their ideas as words of wisdom or as the sayings of the wise. These books convey the conceptual underpinnings of the wisdom literature tradition in ancient Israel, as well as the way in which this tradition defined itself and its role. The fundamental role of wisdom, as depicted in these three books, is to identify the prevailing cosmic order and to instruct its audience to follow its precepts. This tradition and the prophetic tradition, of which the Book of Jeremiah constitutes an integral part, differ mainly in what they identify as the source of their authority, which medium they employ, and their end goal. While wisdom literature relies on human authority in an effort to understand the world’s prevailing order, the prophetic tradition relies on direct divine revelation intended to clarify God’s involvement in essentially singular historical events.

The distinction between the prophetic tradition and the wisdom literature tradition according to these criteria raises questions of the date and function of essentially religious aphorisms in the wisdom books of the Bible, particularly those found in the Book of Proverbs. Aphorisms of this type present the fear of God as a condition for wisdom and emphasize man’s reliance on God and his lack of control over the direction of his life. Following in the footsteps of numerous other researchers, I argue that aphorisms of this type reflect a theological development within the wisdom literature tradition that imparts an increasingly religious character to its underlying values. This development reaches its apotheosis in Proverbs’ latter portions, generally dated to the Persian or Hellenistic periods. Jeremiah’s use of wisdom is discussed in light of this internal development within wisdom literature, a discussion informed by my investigations of both Jeremiah’s place within the theological continuity of wisdom literature, and how his prophecies’ combination of wisdom-related and prophetic elements leads to a greater understanding of the processes that brought about this development.

By remaining conscious of the essential differences between the prophetic and wisdom literature traditions, and positioning sages’ self-conception at the root of the distinction between these genres, one can arrive at a methodology for identifying affinities to wisdom literature in prophetic speech. According to this methodology, the fundamental principles in determining a text’s affinity to wisdom are the centrality of the motif of wisdom-identified thought and the distinct wisdom-related content of its component elements. These principles supersede the statistical examination of such motifs in and outside wisdom literature, in opposition to the perspective common among earlier researchers. The primary motifs discussed in this thesis are terms expressing fundamental concepts of the wisdom literature tradition, creation and nature imagery which serve to center the prevailing cosmic order, and aphorisms expressing this order via clever, pithy discourse. The combination of such motifs in a given passage establishes that text’s affinity to wisdom literature.

Each of this thesis’ chapters deals with a specific passage with an affinity to wisdom literature. After identifying and establishing these affinities, I undertake an examination of the characteristics of the wisdom expressed in the prophecy, as well as the changes carried out by the prophet in his adaptation of these wisdom materials. Following this analysis, I return to the prophetic unit as a whole and examine the ways in which these wisdom elements are integrated within it, as well as wisdom’s contribution to the prophetic message overall.

The thesis’ first chapter focuses on the prophetic unit found in Jeremiah 4:5-31, especially the wisdom passage in verses 22-26. This unique section begins the prophetic cycle concerning the nation from the north, and its dominant motif is the people of Judah’s powerlessness in the face of the approaching enemy. Judah’s sin of foolishness, described in verse 22, is the sole sin enumerated by this unit. The wisdom passage itself contains a unique combination of wisdom-related and prophetic ideas, which will be identified in due course as characteristic of wisdom in the Book of Jeremiah. The prophet subscribes to a conception of wisdom that sees it as the ideal virtue, and stupidity and foolishness as exceedingly negative. Yet this stupidity is by its very nature linked to an inappropriate relationship to God, expressed as a failure to know God. This phrase itself receives a new meaning in Jeremiah as an alternative to the erroneous wisdom of the people of Judah. Beyond identifying the distinct characteristics of wisdom in this passage, I thoroughly examine the link between the poem describing Judah’s destruction as a return to chaos (4:23-26) and the aforementioned denunciation of the people’s foolishness. I contend that this dramatic metaphor represents a specific punishment, adapted to the theology of wisdom, meted out to those who falsely claim to have attained knowledge. The collapse of the prevailing order that provides the basis for acts of wisdom is a fitting punishment for those who neither act in accordance to law nor know God.

The second chapter is centered on the prophecy in Jeremiah 5, particularly the wisdom passage in verses 20-25. The main concern of this unit (1-31) is theodicy, a justification of God’s acts of destruction. Wisdom is one of the sources of authority the prophet appeals to in his efforts to prove that the people of Judah have behaved contrary to these sources’ dictates, thus rendering destruction inevitable. The most significant wisdom-related feature in verses 20-25 is the parallel drawn between the laws of nature and the fear of God. Much like the sages, the prophet demands that the people study the law of nature, and in so doing learn how to behave in the world – but unlike them, he also concludes, as part of this observation of the natural order, that God is omnipotent and his power over nature complete, thus necessitating the fear of God. According to the prophet, foolishness is thus not the failure to draw the proper wisdom-related conclusions from the observation of nature, but rather the ignorance of God’s central role in this system of natural laws, which is indeed such that the system persists (or is abrogated) only in accordance to the divine will. Such a view strays from that put forth in classical wisdom literature, and it arises from the prophet’s own innovations in relation to wisdom.

The prophecy in 8:4-12, which is the main topic of the third chapter, is the only prophecy that records a direct confrontation between Jeremiah and those identified as sages. Over the course of the chapter, I engage in a comprehensive discussion of these sages’ identity, and demonstrate that the sages in Jeremiah’s prophecy are a leadership group particularly identified with the people of Judah, as the group bases its precepts on human authority. The entire prophetic unit in 8:4-12 attributes the destruction to the people’s dearth of reflective thought, and one of the foremost reasons for this deficiency is the people’s confidence in erroneous wisdom. The people behave irrationally and do not reflect upon their actions because they are dependent on the wisdom of their leaders, who hew to the Torah, and are confident that their wisdom is genuine. The prophet argues conversely that adherence to the Torah is no guarantee of wisdom, which demands heeding the word of God as revealed by the prophet. In the prophet’s scheme, spurning God’s word brings about stagnation and the undermining of Torah. This confrontation thus sheds light on the prophet’s point of view, as well as that of his opponents. One of the main innovations arising from this confrontation is that the act of heeding God’s word is defined as a condition for wisdom, in contrast to the view expressed by classical wisdom literature.

The debate over who constitutes a genuine sage is continued, and expanded upon, in the prophetic unit appearing in 9:1-23, which is the topic of the thesis’ fourth chapter. This unit displays the closest terminological and thematic affinity to wisdom literature, and its rhetorical structure begins with an acknowledgment of human wisdom’s failure and concludes with Jeremiah’s presentation of an alternative constituting true wisdom – namely, fear of God. The discussion centers around the passage in 9:11-15 and the affinities between it and the passage which follows, 9:16-21. These passages emphasize God’s unique ability to provide a rationale for the destruction, and, as a corollary, the ineffectiveness of the sages, who have refused to heed God’s voice, in determining these destructive events’ significance. The only wisdom which retains any value is that of the “mourning women” and “cunning women,” who hear the word of God and teach their daughters lamentation. Thus wisdom flows from heeding the word of God, and not from any human faculty. The closing passage serves as the apotheosis of the central idea developed in this prophecy: education and knowledge are valuable only inasmuch as they serve the purpose of knowing God. Its explicit rejection of any wisdom which does not lead to knowledge of God preserves a historical instance of conceptual conflict between practical wisdom and religiously-informed wisdom, and in so doing reinforces the scholarly conjecture that two distinct approaches existed, with the religious approach bringing about a significant change in the underlying values of wisdom literature.

Jeremiah’s disenchantment with human wisdom reaches its height in the prophecy of the new covenant (31:30-36), which is the topic of the thesis’ fifth chapter. This prophecy reflects several outstanding characteristics of Jeremiah’s relationship to wisdom, such as the employment of elements of wisdom within prophetic viewpoints, the perception of the new covenant with God as belonging to the natural order, and the identification of the knowledge of God as the main goal of learning. Yet a comparison of the motifs shared by this prophecy and those predicting calamity reveals that, contrary to the earlier prophecies, here the prophet in fact rejects the possibility of attaining knowledge of God through human means, as this possibility has already failed and led to ruin. In so doing he anticipates theological developments within the wisdom tradition that would ultimately name God alone as the source of genuine wisdom.

The thesis’ final chapter concerns wisdom-related writings appearing in 17:5-13. Wisdom in this prophetic unit is employed for a different end from that of the other units discussed in the thesis. While in these other units the prophet makes use of wisdom-derived elements as part of his critique of the people’s wisdom, for which he suggests alternatives and improvements, the wisdom-related writings in chapter 17 reflect, rather than dispute, wisdom theology’s treatment of divine reward and punishment. The unit as a whole, via a complex network of ideological and phraseological links to the personal supplications of chapters 11-20, serves as a response to the objections to divine reward and punishment these supplications raise. This borrowing from the wisdom tradition is intended to respond to these objections via reliance on an established authority, but the prophet fashions his statements in accordance with his own distinct worldview, which includes, among other things, a prominent religious overtone. The dichotomy between the objections to divine justice raised by the personal supplications and the immutable divine justice described in passages in chapter 17, raises questions as to whether these passages constitute part of the earliest layer of Jeremiah’s text. This discussion leads to the conclusion that it is reasonable to propose that the prophet composed these sections as well, though this is impossible to establish conclusively.

The appendix, which follows the thesis’ final chapter, offers a survey of various units within the Book of Jeremiah, not discussed in depth in the main body of the thesis, which display an affinity with wisdom literature. In most cases, these passages do not appear in the main body of the thesis due to their relatively weak affinity to wisdom, although one wisdom-rich unit is presented here because it is widely believed to belong to a late layer of Jeremiah’s text. Despite this place in the appendix, it is important to identify these passages’ wisdom-related motifs and their relationship to wisdom literature, as it contributes to the understanding of the prophecies in which they appear, and thus to the understanding of the phenomenon of wisdom in Jeremiah as a whole.

The final section of the thesis provides a summary of its main conclusions. The Book of Jeremiah presents its readers with a singularly compelling arena for the encounter between the prophetic and wisdom traditions. The present research demonstrates that Jeremiah is well-acquainted with both the ideas of the wisdom tradition and their means of expression, and that he furthermore identifies with a number of the tradition’s fundamental principles. Nonetheless, wisdom in Jeremiah reveals a prominent religious aspect, one of whose most salient characteristics is the definition of heeding God as a requirement for attaining wisdom. This requirement integrates the prophetic point of view, whose primary medium is revelation, with the wisdom-related point of view, whose primary medium is human thought.

Identifying characteristics of the distinctive wisdom-related outlook found in Jeremiah, alongside a reconstruction of this outlook’s development over the course of the book’s prophecies, serves to verify the hypothesis of a religious development within wisdom, and further bolsters the conjecture that the inclusion of religious elements in wisdom-related discourse does not itself express a single distinct worldview, but instead has various dimensions. Since I demonstrate over the course of the thesis that Jeremiah’s affinities to wisdom literature are largely found in the earliest layers of the text, the thesis offers a historical grounding for the development of the religious dimension of wisdom: it demonstrates the existence of an outlook which, as early as the sixth century BCE, saw God as the ultimate source of wisdom. Furthermore, the thesis suggests a potential source for this development, namely the integration of the prophetic and wisdom-related traditions as expressed in the prophecies of Jeremiah. In light of these prophecies’ well-known influence within wide-ranging spheres in the Exilic era and its aftermath, it may be that this distinctive theological outlook also influenced the composition and compilation of wisdom-related materials in the post-Exilic era; I intend to explore this possibility in further research.