



The Acquisition of Knowledge in Israelite Wisdom Literature

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Modern scholars possess a staggering amount of information about ancient Near Eastern sages, thanks to copious texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia. It has become current knowledge that the early sages reflected on the distinct advantages of belonging to an elite class of scholars, described in some detail the rigors associated with study, divided life's span in terms of the years devoted to education as opposed to reaping its benefits, identified the goal of education, characterized wise persons as silent ones and their opposites as hot headed fools of at least six different types, and used in-house language to define the relationships between teachers and students.

But one thing is missing in Israel's wisdom literature and in extra-biblical texts. Where is any reflection on the learning process itself? To be sure, there is talk of pitching camp and peering through Wisdom's windows and speculation about pursuing Dame Wisdom like precious treasure or a Bride. But not a whisper about the acquisition of knowledge is heard. How did learning occur, and how was it transmitted? To answer these questions, it may be useful to ponder the underlying presuppositions of perhaps the oldest riddle from the ancient world and to reflect on three fundamentally different kinds of knowledge.

I. A THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

"Whoever enters it has closed eyes; whoever departs from it has eyes that are wide open. What is it?"¹ Because riddles employ cipher language that offers a clue and conceals a trap at the same time, the secret is to seize the clue without being caught in the hidden trap. It follows that riddles have more than one answer. The first impulse is to answer, "Life," for a child enters the world with

¹The first part of the riddle is obscure; see Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1963) 236-37.

closed eyes and at death the eyes must be closed for the individual. Indeed, a son is actually described as the person who closes his father's eyes at the moment of death. Alternatively, one is tempted to respond to the question, "What is it?" along erotic lines, for it is widely acknowledged that love is blind. The mystery of eros certainly begins in ignorance and ends with eyes that have been opened widely. However, the intended response is, "A school."

What makes the image of open and closed eyes appropriate as a description of the learning process? Because eyes mirror the soul, the symbolism is particularly apt. Just as eyes are paired, so knowledge was of two kinds: systematic and gnomic. The first, systematic knowledge, sought to order reality by means of philosophical reflection, while the second, gnomic

apperception, endeavored to capture insights from experience and to clothe them in clever statements that could easily be committed to memory.

The image of closed eyes naturally connotes ignorance; whether the empty head, or the wrongly filled mind, or the one that has an illusion of knowledge. The first, ignorance, is by far the easiest to overcome, and the second, prejudice, is the next easiest, for it merely requires a sweeping away of misinformation and a substituting of accurate facts and perceptions. The illusion of knowledge is highly resistant to education, for a closed mind is subject to stagnation. This situation occurs most often where values are treasured, and that makes religion highly vulnerable.

How did teachers open their students' eyes? First, they beat them vigorously. From ancient Sumer we have a nostalgic speech that might have been given at a class reunion. Here are some of the things this former student recalls: Arriving late, I was caned; my homework was incorrect, my teachers beat me; I whispered in class, and was whipped; I neglected to get permission to stand and was caned; my calligraphy was below standards, and they thrashed me; I loitered on the way to school and my teachers beat me.² Second, teachers stimulated lively debate. Perhaps the debate over what is the strongest thing in the world exercised more imaginations than any other topic. One answer to this popular controversy appears in a history of Ethiopia from 1681.³

Iron is strong, but fire tempers it.
Fire is awesome, but water extinguishes it.
Water is forceful, but the sun dries it.
The sun is mighty, but a storm cloud conceals it.
A storm cloud is explosive, but the earth subdues it.
The earth is majestic, but humans master it.
Humans are powerful, but grief overtakes them.
Grief is heavy, but wine assuages it.
Wine is powerful, but sleep renders it weak.
Yet woman is strongest of all.

The third means of opening eyes was the use of suggestive language. Because students almost without exception were males, wisdom was described as a beautiful bride, and folly was depicted as a harlot enticing young men to destruction. In this way language became highly explosive, and the quest for

²S. Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 238.

³The Latin text is printed in R. Laqueur, "Ephoros. Die Proomium," *Hermes* 46 (1911) 172.

wisdom suddenly took on erotic dimensions. But teachers often stood in the way of learning, unintentionally encouraging sleep. Two features of the pedagogic method seem counterproductive, for learning was by memorization and by endless copying of texts. The result in Egypt was reproduction with no real grasp of the meaning of the text being copied.

What about those students whose eyes were opened? They encountered three obstacles to moving beyond knowledge to wisdom. Open eyes see many options, recognizing the complexity of knowledge and refusing to give simple answers; they are bombarded with light, producing the

insatiable appetite of scholars, a source of permanent discontent; and they also become tired, almost jaded, hence the temptation to skepticism. Another ancient text from Mesopotamia advises a potential philanthropist to go up to the cemetery and look at the numerous skulls there and to ask which one is a malefactor and which is the benefactor.⁴

Such skepticism, nay pessimism, is a daily companion of the knowledgeable student of life. How, then, did teachers overcome these obstacles to higher wisdom? They did so by achieving focus. True wisdom, the Egyptian teachers insisted, is virtue. It consists of knowing the right word for the occasion, arguing persuasively, exercising restraint, and speaking the truth. Thus kaleidoscopic images took on recognizable patterns, and jaded eyes lit up with infinite configurations of insight shaped by dominant images.

Nevertheless, wide open eyes blink and must close in sleep, a poignant acknowledgment that learned men sometimes act like fools. But these teachers never forgot that wisdom (hearing) was a stage beyond knowledge (teaching) and that it meant far more than the accumulation of information. Wisdom, the capacity to use information for human good, includes virtue. By virtue these teachers meant generosity and humility. Perhaps a biblical proverb best sums up what these ancient scholars seem to have meant.

Three things are too wonderful for me;
four I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a serpent on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a maiden. (Prov 30:18-19)

Life's abundant mysteries evoke gratitude and reverence before the author of wisdom and truth.

II. THREE WAYS OF ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE

A. *Observation of Nature and Human Behavior*

After this brief effort to formulate a theory of knowledge for the ancient world and to demonstrate an integral connection between knowledge and virtue, let us turn to an elaboration of knowledge in biblical wisdom. How was knowledge acquired? In a word, knowledge resulted from human inquiry rather than from divine initiative. Actually, this formulation of the situation is not exactly correct,

⁴The Dialogue of Pessimism, lines 76-78; see W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) 149.

for at creation the deity was said to have taken the initiative, concealing valuable truths within nature itself. From then on, however, it was left to humans to search out these lessons from nature and from human behavior. The means by which they did this was personal observation, and once an insight emerged it had to be transferred from the natural realm to the human by analogy. Some examples should clarify this complex process of reasoning.

God is tested by fire/humans are tried in the furnace of affliction.

Bees produce honey/do not despise little things.
 A new friend is like new wine/when it has aged you will drink it with pleasure.
 A door turns on its hinges/a lazy person turns over and over in bed.
 A wooden stake is wedged in a fissure between two stones/sin is squeezed in between
 buying and selling.
 Some clouds yield no rain/some people boast of giving and fail to do so.
 A continual dripping of rain on a cold day/a nagging wife.
 The crackling of thorns in a fire/the laughter of fools.
 A bird flitting from nest to nest/ an adulterous old man.
 Whips to control beasts/discipline for children.
 An insatiable appetite like Sheol/a barren womb.
 The rich inflict wrong and berate others/the poor suffer harm and must apologize.
 The rich answer gruffly/the poor are obliged to plead.
 A lamb led to the slaughter/a young man enticed into the home of an adulteress.

These truth statements are the fruit of personal observation by countless sages, who then endeavored to express their insights in language that was both accurate and memorable. In most instances the poet was content to leave the application of the saying to others, and the teacher's task was therefore to discern the circumstance in which a given saying fit. The lessons had to ring true, else they were quickly extinguished from memory, and they had to apply generally to society regardless of time or place. Often quite different possibilities presented themselves to sages, who reached a decision on the basis of the situation. "Do not answer a fool lest you be like him yourself/answer a fool lest he be wise in his own eyes" (Prov 26:4-5). In such circumstances one can only lose, so a choice must be made either to remain silent and give the impression of defeat before an incompetent, or to speak up and thus bestow dignity on the fool's remarks.

Other observations about human behavior moved beyond simple truth statements to explicit counsel, usually reinforced by elaborate exhortations and warnings. These instructions do not leave interpretation to the student, but freely offer advice that leads to happiness and success. Here the religious dimension comes to prominence, and sexual temptation stands as a major source of human folly. Whereas sages who used truth statements were content to describe reality and therefore to let women and men act on their own reading of the situation, those who preferred instructions imposed parental authority on their hearers. In some instances divine authority was also invoked, especially when parental in-

struction and the statutes of the Mosaic law seemed to coalesce. A good example of this mingling of the two kinds of authority occurs in Proverbs 6:20-35, which juxtaposes images of two competing flames. The first is the lamp that mothers and fathers light in the hearts of children, while the second is the fire that sexual passion kindles in unbridled thoughts. The former flame, fueled by the divine law, preserves one from the consuming fire.

Do these two distinct types of teaching, truth statements and instructions, go their separate ways, producing two different literary traditions? Not at all. By the second century Ben Sira combines both kinds of teaching, permitting the emphasis to fall on the conscious development of instructions. As a matter of fact, he fashions the teaching into paragraph units

which permit him to take up numerous topics and to examine subjects at considerable length. Nevertheless, Ben Sira retains the truth statement as well, and some of his observations demonstrate striking intuition. Take, for example, this maxim: “Dreams give wings to fools” (Sir 34:1). Here in a few words he has captured an important reality, and while it is true that Ben Sira goes on to apply this insight to a specific case of divination, the allusive quality of the truth saying makes it applicable to many circumstances.

If we could only recover the sociological setting for these two kinds of teaching it would enable us to understand them far better.⁵ For example, did sages use truth statements when dealing with advanced students and colleagues, while reserving instructions for younger learners? We do not know, but one thing seems clearer today than before. The truth statements were just as authoritative as instructions despite their different literary form. In at least three cases within Proverbs larger instructions quote truth statements as their clinching argument. Dame Folly offers her most persuasive appeal to young men in a truth statement: “Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant” (Prov 9:17). Here is the heart of her seduction, and it rests on an awareness of the incredible power of suggestion. Once the mind has been set on a track, it proceeds to fill in the picture from its store of imagination and desire.

B. Analogy: Creed and Reality

Thus far we have restricted our thoughts to the insights that come through human inquiry. The observation of nature and humans yields dividends precisely because it was believed that laws governed the universe and insured prosperity if one lived in harmony with them. But not all truth was the product of human inquiry. In reality, each passing generation was confronted with the accumulated tradition of truth statements and of instructions, which had lost the freshness of discovery. This treasury from the past came with certain claims of authority and therefore placed new generations in a context of decision. “Do these statements ring true for me?” they had to ask. In a sense, the legacy from the past comprised faith reports, and devotion toward parents complicated matters enormously. The tendency was to accept these faith reports at face value,

⁵Frank Crüzemann, “The Unchangeable World: The ‘Crisis of Wisdom’ in Koheleth,” *God of the Lowly*, ed. Willi Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis, 1984) 57-77, is an immensely suggestive attempt to recover the sociological setting for Qoheleth’s ideas.

even when they contradicted the personal experience of later generations. Often this inclination was strengthened by an understanding of the world as becoming progressively worse. Because the golden age lay in the past, they thought, the human intellect may have lost some of its power. It therefore followed that assent could be given to parental convictions even when present reality failed to confirm them. Naturally, dogmas arose as a result of this combination of factors, and nowhere was rigidity of beliefs as destructive as in the area of reward and punishment. The belief that sinners fared badly and virtuous persons prospered was seldom borne out in reality, but this dogma produced crises in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel. When the authority of the past weighed heavily on the present, such a crisis naturally followed.

Canonical wisdom bears impressive witness to the difficulty encountered by those who tested faith reports in the light of their own experience of reality. The unknown author of Job examines this dilemma with immense pathos, finally declaring the bankruptcy of secondhand

faith. Such assent to the convictions that once sustained others could not survive divine absence or hostile presence. In the end Job confessed as much, insisting that his spiritual life had always been derivative, despite quite a different assessment of the matter by God and by the narrator in the prologue. For Job the issue was simply hearing as opposed to sight, a strange way of stating things in a community of scholars for whom a sage was best characterized as the hearing, that is, obedient one. Indeed, hearing was equivalent to acting on one's insights, and that was the supreme achievement within wisdom.

Psalm 73 describes a comparable struggle between creed and reality. It opens with a confession of faith that God is truly good to the pure in heart, but the psalmist quickly admits that events render such faith vacuous, for the lion's share of goodies has fallen to wicked persons. Beset by sore temptation, this believer wrestles with doubting thoughts which are recognized as brutish. But a change occurs when the psalmist looks away from prosperous villains and enters the holy place where hearts are purified. There the doubter affirms the faith once more, and soars to hitherto unachieved heights. Suddenly a redefinition of divine goodness overwhelms the psalmist, who realizes for the first time that God's goodness has absolutely nothing to do with things that can be seen and touched, such as material prosperity. Instead, the goodness which comes to decent persons is a feeling of divine presence that bestows confidence regardless of the circumstances. Then at long last the psalmist is able to subscribe to the ancient confession, now that its real meaning has become clear.

The same kind of struggle overtook a traditionalist like Ben Sira, who recounted Israel's sacred story in a time when history gave no evidence that the deity guided the nation Israel toward some unseen destiny. In this instance the scribe complicated matters by taking over traditional faith and linking it with wisdom's universal truths. Whereas he could easily test the latter teachings by his own experience, he could not demonstrate the reliability of claims that God had fought against Pharaoh on behalf of an oppressed people. So what did Ben Sira do in this situation, discard the sacred story? By no means. Instead, he uttered a fervent prayer that God would renew the wondrous signs witnessed by previous generations. Here we see the positive reinforcement of faith that often accompanies experiences which ordinarily render credal affirmations suspect.

C. Encounter with the Transcendent One

So far we have observed two ways through which people arrived at truth. They observed nature, drawing conclusions by means of analogical thinking, and they listened to reports from others who claimed to have discovered valuable insights. There is yet a third way by which knowledge was thought to have reached ancient sages: immediate encounter with the Transcendent One. From one perspective, such claims do not belong in wisdom literature, where a premium is placed on verifiability. How can others test the truth of claims about encountering deity? When the sages resort to this sort of argument they threaten their own fundamental assumption about the capability of the intellect to secure one's existence. The ending to the book of Job, for example, is a response that derives from traditions which are more at home in prophecy and sacred narrative than in wisdom. Here Job claims to have achieved new insight as a direct result of an encounter with deity. The same thing seems to be implied in Psalm 73, where an experience of the deity's hand on the psalmist evokes a splendid acknowledgment that this

moment alone is worthy of recollection. The result of the encounter is nothing less than a transvaluation of values, and the psalmist cherishes this sensed presence above all else. A comparable testimony to an encounter with the Holy One occurs in the speech by one of Job's friends, Eliphaz. The account describes an appearance of a numinous figure and the resulting response by a mere earthling. The physical transformation (the hair standing straight up and sense of overwhelming dread) was nothing compared to the knowledge communicated to Eliphaz. In short, the deity is said to have whispered an accusing word: "Shall mortals be more righteous than the creator?" (4:17).

In these appeals to direct encounter with the Most High, a decisive step is taken that opens the door to elaborate theories about communication between creator and creature. The first impressive figure to walk through this door was a woman who identified herself as Wisdom. In many respects, this development is one of the most interesting ones to come out of sapiential thinking. The imagery seems at first to be purely metaphorical, but eventually it signified an actual divine attribute. Egyptian influence is evident at the initial stage, Greek at the very end. Antedating creation, Wisdom assisted the creator and later came to earth in order to communicate the deity's thoughts to all creatures. In Ben Sira's adaptation of the concept, Wisdom established a dwelling in Jerusalem and infused the Mosaic law, with which she became identical. For the author of the Greek Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom is a pure emanation of the deity. Therefore, whoever acquires wisdom as a bride also possesses the personal attributes of the deity, particularly the four cardinal virtues.

What enabled such ideas to thrive within wisdom literature? An answer appears to lie in the central position that reflections about creation occupied among the sages. A theology of creation is at home in texts which speak of the High God, as opposed to patron deities who guided the affairs of a small clan. The advantage of patron deities was their accessibility in all circumstances, their nearness to devotees. No such assumptions adhere to thoughts about the distant creator, whose task was to govern the universe. Naturally, the need was soon felt to find some means to bridge the great distance separating humans

from the High God. One answer came from Hebraic tradition, another from the Hellenic world. The Spirit of God who inspired poets, priests, and prophets was identified with the divine thought, word, and wisdom. Alternatively, the human mind was a microcopy of the divine mind. Hence the human intellect possessed a tiny spark of the divine rationality governing the universe, an idea that linked Israelite sages with Greek philosophers. These two responses to the problem of a transcendent deity implied that the human intellect was in direct touch with ultimate truth.⁶

Belief in direct encounter with transcendence constitutes a link with non-sapiential texts in the biblical canon. However, a decisive difference between the wise and others remained. Perhaps Deuteronomy 30:1-14 comes closest to illustrating this difference. For this author the divine statute is neither too difficult nor too remote, but it is very near and can be kept. The text seems to suggest that detractors were denigrating the divine word because of its accessibility, exalting insights that were acquired at great cost. The author elevates revelation over discoveries resulting from human inquiry. For Israel's sages, revelation occurred at creation, and the goal of men and women was to discover hidden truth.

⁶Two skeptical responses to such optimism are Qoheleth and Agur (Prov 30:1-4).