

European Association of Biblical Studies in 2021

Session on Wisdom Literature

How important is God in the thought of the sages of Israel?

Summary: Some scholars have highlighted God's relevance in Old Testament in two different directions. One is the saving power of God, who intervenes from time to time more or less 'directly from above', the God who is active in salvation history. The other is the creating power of God, the one who through blessings manifests himself 'horizontally' in the world, immanently in the course of events from one generation to the next.¹

This presentation will attempt to demonstrate **that for the sages of Israel both of these aspects emerge unified, rendering a multidimensional portrait that values God as crucial for fullness in human life.** In fact, focused on many different aspects of human existence, the sages of Israel are always determined to relate God, both as savior and creator, as the key to the full sense of human existence. Though many argue that they are not unique, we would like to attempt to underline their own way to display it. Some examples and keywords from Proverbs, Job, and Qohelet will be presented and discussed.

1. God in the horizon of the human being existence

It is undisputable that the **sages behind the wisdom books** were Yahwistic. Although their surprising silence about the main historical events related to God, their horizon of faith is the God of Israel, the one that revealed himself to Moses, established a covenant and promised a land.

¹ These two directions have been very well exposed in C. WESTERMANN, *What Does the Old Testament Say about God?* London: SPCK, 1979; J.L. CRENSHAW, "The Concept of God in Old Testament", in *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions. Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom*, Mercer University Press, Macon, GA 1995, 191-205; "God in Wisdom Literature" *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Wisdom Literature*, Eds. Samuel L. Adams and Matthew Goff, John Wiley & Sons 2020. For a recent development of God as creator see (L. Perdue and... Bib, Crenshaw Clifford and Collins).

They regard themselves as worshipers of this God, using all the recognized names: *'ēlôhîm; 'ēlô^ah; 'ēl šādday; Yhwh*. However, they understood that, as sages their special role was to uncover and interpret the messages that God had implanted into the world, available to the carefully observant and waiting to be discovered. Generally, the sages regarded the world of nature as a sacred text upon which God has written important insights about life.

Nevertheless, they frequently disagree as to whether God's inserted message is easy or difficult to read. In either case, they believe that wisdom comes to those who carefully observe the ways of nature and the complexities of human behavior. Although, some sages asserted rather that God placed wisdom too deep to be extracted, making the task of discovering sense and success of life very difficult and sometimes almost impossible.²

It was inside this process, that **sages from different generations** received and passed-on wisdom, rejecting and offering counter instructions and enlightenments. Their ongoing dialogue and debate became part of wisdom tradition and the field upon which persistent cross-examinations gain a particular attention.

We easily think that their concerns were mostly anthropological, such as the success in life, the problem of evil, the innocent suffering, the achievement and the safety of the human being.

However, often the sages assumed that a caring and merciful God governs the universe, creating the conviction that innocent suffering ought not to happen. But, dealing with the persistent fact that innocent suffers, the sages wondered about God's effective govern and power over creation, which for some of them was an inference they found disturbing.

On the one hand, they were committed Yahwists, submitted to God as the unique governor of existence. On the other hand, their commitment to human observation as genuine and important source of truth caused them to **question their most basic assumptions about God.**

2. A multidimensional portrait

Although faithful to a merciful God, believed as creator and savior, the constant new evidence of human existence required to **rethink basic**

² One example is the all the questions that the sages place in Job's mouth that remained unanswered... or the ambiguities of the reality observed by Kohelet that finds no answer in God relation and revelation. Wisdom, sense and success have not evident ways of achievement.

principles and pressed the sages to express boundless doubts, that a few times reached a skeptical debate regarding God’s goodness and consistency.³ One example is the early wisdom belief on the “law of retribution”, well attested in Proverbs. The experience of a profound uncertainty constrained the sages to raise an inquiring that did not spare **their own idea of God**, of which the debate of God’s power and behavior, well attested in the Book of Job, and the human profit relate to a God that dominates the Book of Qohelet are a vehement example. **As a result, the traditional and undeniable importance of God developed from the certainty to a debate, where creator and creation appear intrinsically involved.** The sages discovered that human existence called to receive God’s revelation can be also a place **where God can be understood and debated without diminishing God’s relevance, rather strengthens it.** The different ways the sages found to fathom this debate became the leading basis of a multidimensional God’s portrait.

a. A striking reversal of the image of God

One singular aspect of the sages of the **book of Proverbs** is their portraying God’s action with a **parental image**.

11 מוֹסֵר יְהוָה בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים
 אֶל-תְּמַאֲס וְאֶל-תִּלְקֹץ בְּתוֹכְהֶם:
 12 כִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר יֵאָהֵב יְהוָה
 יוֹרִיחַ אֶת-בְּנוֹ יִרְצֶה:

Pr 3:11 My child, do not despise the LORD’S discipline or be weary of his reproof, ¹² for the LORD reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

In fact, Pr 3,11-12 should not be seen as simple and standard analogy. Rather, **it is a striking reversal of the image of God.** Instead, of humans modeling their behavior on Yahweh’s actions, as we are used to, is God that is said to act like a father who discipline children out of love (Pr 3,11-12).⁴ This reversal suggests a specific way the sages found to express God’s relevance. They are

³ Cf. K. DELL, The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature...

⁴ Cf. J.L. CRENSHAW, “Divine discipline in Job 5:17-18, Proverbs 3:11-12, Deuteronomy 32:39, and beyond”, in *Reading Job Intertextually* (ed. Katharine Dell - Will Kynes), London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 178-189.

perfectly aware that the human conduct is very important for acquiring wisdom and success, but it must be considered inside **the horizon of a God that acts as a father**, protects and watches over all, in special for those he loves. Is the certainty of this specific God's presence and action, that permits the sage to assure reward and retribution.⁵ Moreover, allows the sages to urge the widows, the orphans, and the righteous poor to rely on God's strength; as father, God will provide a safe refuge (Pr 22,22–23); weigh the spirit and test human hearts (Pr 24,12), condemning the proud and repaying kindness to the impoverished.⁶

b. A set of controversial images

The dialogic nature of **the Book of Job** allows the sages to portrait **God in various ways**. As we read the prose framework, we immediately meet a God open to a heavenly dispute with consequences on human life of Job, his family and possessions.

... the very same God that fully trusts his servant Job to remain loyal; accepts sacrifice and intercessory prayer; rewards faithfulness with abundance, even giving a new family to replace the seven sons and three daughters who perished.⁷

In the poetry framework, Job's three friends differ slightly in their concept of God. A single thought unites these men who came from far away to comfort Job: God can do no wrong. Although had been described deeply moved with Job's misery, when they speak, all that matters to them is **God in his**

⁵ Cf. L. Boström, *The God of the Sages: The Portrayal of God in the Book of Proverbs*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990.

⁶ Cf. J.L. CRENSHAW, "God in Wisdom Literature" *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Wisdom Literature*, Eds. Samuel L. Adams and Matthew Goff, John Wiley & Sons 2020, 216.

⁷ Cf. ROGERSON, J.W., *A Theology of the Old Testament: Cultural memory, communication, and being human*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 2010; GOLDINGAY, J., *Israel's faith: Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, InterVarsity, Downers Grove, 2006; MARE, L., "The God of Job", *Verbum et Ecclesia* 33(2012) 681-688; TIMMER, D., "Gods Speeches Jobs Responses and the Problem of Coherence in the Book of Job: Sapiential Pedagogy Revisited", *CBQ* 71/2 (2009) 286-305. For this author: "This is an extremely disturbing image of God. He accepts a bet on the life of one of his own.¹⁰ What kind of God is this, who gambles with the life of this righteous man? What kind of God is this, who allows the satan to attack Job and even take away the lives of his children, just to prove a point? It seems as if this God can easily be manipulated into doing all kinds of horrible deeds. All that is needed is the right wager, and the proud parent turns into a monster. It seems that this God is not trustworthy because he will at the throw of a dice allow the most horrible suffering in the life of one of his own. God is portrayed as being responsible for evil in this world. It is his fault that Job loses everything; it is his fault that in one fell swoop, Job's children all die, and in an age where offspring were regarded to be a sign of blessing, Job becomes a cursed man".

overwhelming and divine mystery (Jb 4:12–17). To the fourth friend, Elihu, God keeps being the main concern to be defended (Jb 32:2; 33:12.26; 34:9; 35:10; 36:2; 37:15.22).⁸ **The importance the sages give to God in the development of Job’s drama finds a significant moment in Jb 28.** Apparently, the sage seems engaged in describing amazing human abilities. However, this is just to emphasize that nothing compares God’s knowledge of wisdom ways.

The relevance the sages attribute to God achieves the highest point in Jb 38–42, remarkable by God’s direct speech. For several scholars God’s words to Job suggest a **very controversial God’s portrait**, strongly discussed in the past years.⁹ Although at this point, one would expect God to admit his role in Job’s suffering, and to stand up for what he did to Job, giving an explanation how he has been persuaded by satan, and how not once, but twice, he was manipulated into allowing the satan to harm Job, the sages surprise us with a series of rhetorical questions.¹⁰ Questions that Job cannot answer, since he is just a righteous man who feared his God.¹¹ **God is portrayed as the Creator, the Almighty, the one who holds everything in his hand and has everything under his control.** The image that the sages provide for God here is that of the sovereign.

According to E.A. Seibert, this portrayal of God should not be understood as a revelation of who God really is, but he is a literary construct created by a

⁸ According to J.L. CRENSHAW, “Edward Greenstein argues that the subject of this activity is God. He arrives at this conclusion by assuming a textual dislocation in which the ending of Elihu’s speech has been transferred to this position in the manuscript. Behind this imagery, he posits two models for describing the Deity: the heavenly, primarily solar, one, and that of depth, an abyss.” [Cf. J.L. Crenshaw, “God in Wisdom Literature”, 217; GREENSTEIN, E.L., “The poem on Wisdom in Job 28 in its conceptual and literary contexts”, in *Job 28*, Ed. ELLEN VAN WOLDE, Leiden: Brill, 253–280].

⁹ This controversy have been strongly discussed [cf. MARE, L., “The God of Job”, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 33(2012) 681-688; TIMMER, D., “Gods Speeches Jobs Responses and the Problem of Coherence in the Book of Job: Sapiential Pedagogy Revisited”, *CBQ* 71/2 (2009) 286-305; DELL, K., “Does God Behave Unethically in the Book of Job”, in *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue*, Ed. K. DELL; New York; London: T & T Clark, 2010, 170-186; D.J. Clines, *Job’s God: A surfeit of Theologies?* (Plenary Paper to the ANZATS/ANZSTS Annual Conference with the Society of Biblical Literature, Perth, Australia, 6 July 2005) [www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/jobsgodper].

¹⁰ Cf. HABEL, N.C., “The verdict on/of God at the end of Job, in *Job’s God*, Ed. E. VAN WOLDE, SCM, London: 2004, 27–38 “The Creator questions one of his creatures on creation. Habel (2004:28) rightly says that God’s speeches serve to intimidate Job and to bring him to his knees.”

¹¹ One would expect God to acknowledge that he was responsible for the evil that befell Job. At least then Job might have understood that he was at the mercy of a wager between God and the Satan. However, not once does God provide such an explanation, not once does he admit his role in this tragedy, not once does he accept responsibility for what he has done to Job, not once does he show regret for what he has. [cf. Mathewson, D., *Death and survival in the Book of Job: Desymbolization and traumatic experience*, T & T Clark, London., 2006, 136-137. This author suggests the speeches of God, in fact, seem to be completely unrelated to anything that has gone before].

human author to fulfil a specific role in the narrative.¹² **The sages behind Job's created the character of God as part of his protest against conventional wisdom thinking and retribution theory, which understand God to be the one, who blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked.** Protesting against this simplistic worldview, Job's God becomes a harsh and forbidding character who punishes the righteous without reason. Job's God thus turns out to be a rhetorical construct of Job's sages in order to serve the sages' theological purpose.¹³

D. Timmer prefers to consider sage's proposal that all human knowledge comes back to the question about commitment to God as statement of penetrating perceptiveness.¹⁴ According to this author, God's speeches establish that Job is not capable of understanding divine עצה even in the sphere of nature, much less in matters of theodicy. The divine speeches set limits to the sapiential enterprise, especially by inculcating a reverence that exempts God from definitive judgment and guards God's unique status as the norm of norms.

The Book of Job portrays reverence for God as a distinct characteristic of Israelite wisdom and the fundamental presupposition of sapiential reflection. One is reminded of Crenshaw's thesis that precisely because Israelite sages realized that it was God's glory "to conceal essential reality" (Prov 25:2), they experienced "a gracious opening of the door [to wisdom and especially mystery] by God."¹⁵

In their search for wisdom, the sages "oscillated between two extremes, trust in one's ability to secure existence and dependence upon God's mercy."⁷

It is in illuminating but not destroying this tension that the Book of Job finally coheres and makes its unique contribution. The strongest support for this coherence is a puzzling portrait of God, without which the wise men would not be able to convey their message, of which the core is no doubt to envision and affirm how they considered God's relevance.

¹² Cf. SEIBERT, E.A., *Disturbing divine behavior: Troubling Old Testament images of God*, Fortress, Minneapolis.2009, 171-173. Seibert proposes that the Old Testament descriptions of God should not be understood as aspects of his self-revelation, but as human depictions of God, assumed here as the sages of Israel. This means that not every image of God reflects who he really is. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the characterization of God in the Bible and the character of God in reality. Consequently, it is required that we differentiate between the 'textual God' and the 'actual God'... The textual God is a literary representation; the actual God is a living reality. This means that not every image of God reflects who he really is. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the characterization of God in the Bible and the character of God in reality.

¹³ Cf. SEIBERT, E.A., *Disturbing divine behavior...* 217.

¹⁴ Cf. Timmer, D. (2009), *Gods Speeches Jobs Responses and the Problem of Coherence in the Book of Job: Sapiential Pedagogy Revisited*, 304-305.

¹⁵ Cf. J.L. Crenshaw, "God in Wisdom Literature", 217

For Qoheleth, life seems to be wholly without meaning. Two reasons led to this peculiar conclusion. First, nothing that humans do has lasting effect, memory is short, and death cancels every achievement. Second, life is too short, like a breath, ending in obscurity. **Rather than easing the angst arising from this conclusion, belief in God has exacerbated it.** God dwells far away, seemingly not interested in petitions or praise from below. The proper attitude toward this Deity is fear. That which God created is unalterable, even things hostile to daily existence.

Some dare to consider that Qoheleth think God was a judge. The use of verb *shapat* in Eccl. 11:9b certainly suggests that, although this quotation is often thought to be a gloss. The reason is, given Qoheleth's pessimism about equity or fairness in daily life, it is hard to think he really believed that God paid attention to justice.

The statement in the second epilogue that God will bring everything into judgment (Eccl. 12:14) may have led to the addition of the warning about a judgment. In this context it is very interesting L. Gorssen position.¹⁶ He thinks the verb *shapat* means "to put one in the proper condition." In other words, Qoheleth says that whatever takes place is the result of divine determinism. This means that for the sages behind the book of Qoheleth, God places human beings in the exact situation in which they find themselves, and it is proper because God did it.¹⁷

The scholars struggle to just to grasp the sages' meaning trying to go further of considering the book a riddled with contradictions,¹⁸ or to assume the ambiguities as meaningful, reflecting the ambiguities of life itself.¹⁹

But the fact is that if Job's God could be seen as an oppressive presence; Qoheleth's God seems to be distant and unmoved by the human condition, and a saving God seems never to have entered Qoheleth's mind.²⁰

In both books of Job and Ecclesiastes the sages broke away from the proverbial sayings of Proverbs in favor of poetic dialogue and debate as the chief medium of discourse. Qoheleth, however, carries on an internal

¹⁶ L. Gorssen (1970).

¹⁷ The approach of Saadia Gaon, an important medieval rabbi, does justice to both God and humankind. Saadia thinks God has bestowed the greatest gift on us, namely life. Everything above that is pure grace. (Crenshaw, 221)

¹⁸ Michael V. Fox has underlined¹⁸ with the title of his book *Qoheleth and His Contradictions* (1989), although a later book of his has a title that instead emphasizes times for opposing actions in the composition (1999).

¹⁹ Thomas Krüger (2007),

²⁰ Crenshaw

dialogue, debating with his own mental faculties and employing a rhetoric of indecision, one in which he had difficulty making up his mind on several issues.²¹

3. A singular way to display God's importance in human life

This brief overview of how sages' questioning their most basic assumptions about God, permits us also to underline a singularity inside the whole biblical revelation.

God is envisioned from an open debate where all reality can be questioned... the retribution, the sense, the power, the knowledge, the profit...

This ability to affirm God's importance through a debate where God's presence and action marks the specific singularity of the sages.

This debate is complex and puzzling. The sages are open to question but also determined to affirm God's importance, both as savior and creator, as the key to the full sense of human existence. As we saw each book portrays God, unifying and valuing God both savior and creator as crucial for fullness in human life.²²

The emphasis on God's likeness to loving parents of the sages in Proverbs includes unsurprisingly the notion of God as creator. The cosmological focus that characterizes other descriptions of God as creator is almost entirely absent, but the idea of Yahweh as creator is well legitimate in Pr 8,22-31, where Wisdom is said to have preceded cosmogony and witnessed the origins of heaven and earth. In her own words, she is the first of God's creations. The idea that God created the entire world is echoed here and elsewhere in Proverbs. The maker of heaven and earth also made the hearing ear and seeing eye (20:12), as well as rich and poor (22:2); God made everything for its purpose.²³

In the book of Job, in special Jb 38-42, God's enthusiasm over the newly created cosmos seems boundless, matching the jubilation of the stars. That

²¹ Benjamin Lyle Berger (2001) *The reason: life's absurdities*. Drawing on deconstructionism in literary theory, Benjamin Lyle Berger (2001) thinks of Qoheleth's rhetoric as one of erasure. Unfortunately, the erasure was not enough to remove the contradictions.

²² Cf. *Living under the sun* p. 111.

²³ The idea that God created the entire world is echoed here and elsewhere in Proverbs. The maker of heaven and earth also made the hearing ear and seeing eye (20:12), as well as rich and poor (22:2); God made everything for its purpose, J.L. CRENSHAW, "God in Wisdom Literature" *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Wisdom Literature*, Eds. Samuel L. Adams and Matthew Goff, John Wiley & Sons 2020, 216.

excitement continues when Yahweh refers to the creatures of the wild, whose continued existence is made possible by divine provision. God can hardly contain excitement over the war horse but knows no bounds when the topic of Behemoth and Leviathan comes up. These two creatures, who represent chaos and who resemble the hippopotamus and crocodile of Egyptian iconography, although with mythic elements, are represented as sport for God's power and governance. Notably, mortals are mentioned only with reference to these two awesome creatures, and the emphasis falls on pride. Wonder abounds; God, not humans, is the center of attention.²⁴ Finally, to Qohelet God is not simply that it pays off, but the God beyond human reach.²⁵ God is the horizon of human being existence; an existence that is unthinkable out of a God, known and believed as creator and savior.²⁶

4. Challenges to OT theology

The challenges to OT theology still be in process, since we still working and digging these masterful writings of sages.

However, much can be done to understand the sages subtile change in their literary strategy. The traditional comprehension of a God that seeks the human being (where are you 'adam?) are replaced by human being questions (who are you God?), transforming the anthropological concerns ultimately in a God's experience and knowledge, as far as possible. In fact, there is no newness in the allegation of God's extremely importance for the sages of Israel and for the entire biblical writers. What it seems to remain a challenge resides in the "how" important God is and how the sages expressed this importance in the cross examinations of their words. Moreover, how this importance defines key aspects of wisdom theology and how does it fit in with the theology of the Hebrew Bible as a whole.²⁷

²⁴ William P. Brown (2014) thinks wonder is the central theme of sapiential teaching, not just the book of Job. Convinced that *homo sapiens* is best described as *homo admirans*, he links wonder and creation in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.

²⁵ Cf. Living under the sun p. 111.

²⁶ The literary challenge seems to be this one: while Torah and Prophecy places the human being in the horizon of Go's Revelation, wisdom sets God in the horizon of human being existence.

While in Torah and in Prophecy is God's revelation (call | words) the core that should determine human being existence... in Wisdom Books the sages change the literary strategy and place the human existence as the core that defies God's portrait either as creator or savior. In Torah and Prophecy human being is mainly a receiver of the Revelation. In Wisdom the human being and his existence are the main places where this revelation is debated and in a certain sense validated.

²⁷ Since we define the field of study the Hebrew Bible, we will focus our attention on the books of Proverbs, Job and Kohelet. The three wisdom books that integrate the Hebrew Bible.

The importance the sages attributed to God is not bigger than the other biblical writers, but the way they built and underlined this importance demarcated a specific ground, where God is incessantly and critically placed in an open debate. Inside this debate, God is vital, to build knowledge and solid relationship. Creation and salvation are the horizon of God in its certainty and determination.