Introduction: One God or Many Gods?

Monotheism, the belief in only one God and the claim that all other gods were an illusion, and wisdom, coping with everyday life by reason alone, are difficult to reconcile. Founded on three pillars (revelation, law, and restoration), monotheism is the product of fear and conflict, fear of the unknown and a desire to erect boundaries between the known and the unknown. Wisdom makes no claim to possess privileged knowledge beyond that subject to objective verification. Whereas monotheism divides humanity, at least in its three Abrahamic representatives, wisdom views humankind as a single family. Emerging as a response to the social and political instabilities in which a small set of Judean communities found themselves, monotheism was "fashioned in the fires of political struggle," giving voice to those on the margins of power who sought the restoration of the kingdom and political authority.[1]

For many readers, monotheism suggests the belief in only one God, whereas wisdom implies a deep intellectual understanding believed to have been acquired by only a few people who reap the benefits of advanced age and wide experience.[2] For our purposes, however, wisdom is short for wisdom literature, a special area of research under a broader discipline, religious studies.[3] The term wisdom literature originated to describe texts in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) that offer urgent advice to youth on how to succeed in life and ask probing questions of everyone about the problem of unjust suffering and the meaning of existence. The word "wisdom" appears throughout these texts and is even personified as a divine emanation or avatar.

[1] See the stimulating discussion by Jeremiah W. Cataldo, *A Social-Political History of Monotheism: From Judah to the Byzantines* (London: Routledge, 2018). The quoted phrase is from p. 225. See also Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), especially pp. 178–180 where he argues that Israel's monotheism emerged in the context of its lack of power in the face of empires, perhaps as a form of resistance to them.

[2] From inception, biblical monotheism was an aspirational ideal, like moral perfection. It competed with belief in many gods, which continued in remote areas where the appeal of Asherah compensated for portrayal of YHWH as Israel's husband. The emergence of a female personification of Wisdom supports archaeological evidence of longing for a mother goddess. Monotheism tended to elevate YHWH (the eventual victor in the hunt for a name among many—El, El Shaddai, Elyon, Baal, etc.) for the biblical deity, creating distance from devotees, spatially and emotionally. Moreover, a single God had to assume responsibility for bad things that inevitably occurred. Tribal deities were believed to have been more personally involved with humans. To them, women prayed for fertility, men for victory in battle, everyone for health. The origin of monotheism, which others have explored in great depth, lies outside my task.

[3] The study of wisdom literature came of age with the publication of Gerhard von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970). An English translation soon followed. For a critique, see James L. Crenshaw, "Wisdom in Israel by Gerhard von Rad," *Religious Studies Review* 2 (1976), 6–12, and for an analysis of each book in the wisdom corpus and ancient Near Eastern parallels, see James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*. 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

Belief in God is as old as Paleolithic times. Insufficient evidence prevents us from saying whether it arose as monotheism, the worship of the sun, its earliest manifestation in Egypt, or polytheism with gods like Inana in Sumer, Ishtar in Babylon, Anat in Canaan, Isis in Egypt, and Aphrodite in Greece. Nor do we know whether religion began as an epiphany of wonder as Rudolf Otto believed, or as fear, a feeling of absolute dependence, as Friedrich Schleiermacher imagined. Ancient Near Eastern history seems to suggest an early polytheism, broken briefly in Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE, and superseded during the Axial Age, a period characterized by a merchant economy and vast wealth. The emerging monotheism has survived in the West despite Christian theologians' introduction of Trinitarian thought, the Enlightenment, secular humanism, atheism, and the death of God theology. It is too early to say whether the violence of the Abrahamic religions and their fundamentalism that manifests itself in political activism will put an end to theism as we know it today. Monotheism has always had inherent dangers, the disappearing deity in transcendence and its opposite, the humanizing of God. In addition, polytheism appealed to the masses who resisted royal and priestly enforcement of loyalty to them and their deity. A third alternative, the loss of self in the paradox, All or Nothing, has always claimed a few followers in India and in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Those for whom the Bible does more than gather dust on a coffee table may recognize the books called wisdom literature in the description above, for Proverbs abounds in parental counsel made urgent by the consequences of decisions by the young, the book of Job agonizes over innocent suffering and how to speak to and about God when assurances of faith are believed to be unreliable. Ecclesiastes (also known as Qoheleth) views life as *hebel* (futile, empty, and meaningless) and death as an erasure of all profit from a lifetime of toil. These books are the product of centuries, with much of Proverbs being preserved orally at first, perhaps also Job 1–2.[4] Readers who are familiar with the Apocrypha, mostly Roman Catholic and Orthodox, will add Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and Wisdom of Solomon.[5] These two books were composed in the second and first centuries BCE, an era when Hellenistic philosophy and Judaism competed for the minds of the curious in a complex society. The two

[4] The pre-literary stage of biblical wisdom has been studied by Claus Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990) and Timothy J. Sandoval, "The Orality of Wisdom Literature," 267–285 in Samuel L. Adams and Matthew Goff, eds. *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Wisdom Literature* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020).

[5] Nearly two-thirds of Sirach in Hebrew has survived, including fragments discovered at Qumran and Masada. The Greek text of Wisdom of Solomon is preserved in the great majuscule manuscripts Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and Alexandrinus.

centuries were rife with political jockeying for power and the inevitable unrest among the weak.

Because the Hebrew Bible originated in a culture deeply influenced by the neighbors with whom the Israelites interacted daily, sometimes willingly and often under duress, modern interpreters have mined the surviving literature from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia for views like those in biblical wisdom. They naturally attached the label "wisdom Literature" to the texts that used the word wisdom while offering advice to the young or wrestling with existential issues like life's meaning and the justice of God (theodicy). Although specialists of texts from the ancient Near East consider the label somewhat misleading because in these non-biblical texts magic and cultic manipulation of the gods play an important role, they do not deny their fundamental kinship in language and attitude with biblical wisdom.[6] Can belief in only one God fit into the intellectual world of sages? After all, they seem to have made peace with polytheism for more than three millennia at least in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Biblical wisdom began at a time when henotheism, the belief in one God but not denying that other gods existed, reigned. Wisdom flourished as monotheism made an appearance in the late sixth century BCE, possibly to protest polytheism in Babylonian exile. One could even call monotheism and outlier.

One of the ironies of history is that wisdom literature emerged in a polytheistic environment. Belief in many gods divides people; wisdom unites them, preventing chaos. The two worldviews clashed from the very beginning. With mythic tales describing the exploits of divine heroes circulating everywhere, wise teachers in the civilizations nourished by three great rivers (Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile) focused a spotlight on the human potential to shape character. That this light was not extinguished for over three millennia attests to the high value placed on character formation and wrestling with existential questions.[7]

The desire to be wise lies deep within, but gaining wisdom requires individual choice and discipline. The earliest path to broader knowledge was by observing how things work and compiling lists of analogies from nature, animals, and personal relationships. As information accumulated over many lifetimes, witty individuals coined insights into parallel couplets. Poets turned oral sayings into literature, using similes to illustrate kinship among different

[6] Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 1 ("Wisdom is strictly a misnomer as applied to Mesopotamian literature. Generally, 'wisdom' refers to skill in cult and magic lore, and the wise man is the initiate"). Giorgio Buccellati, "Wisdom and Not: The Case of Mesopotamia," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 101 (1981), 35–47 prefers the word "attitude" to describe the relationship.

[7] See William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

things, rhetorical questions to engage listeners, and brief narration to sustain attention. Gathered over time, the collections helped parents and teachers change lives for the common good. Leaders adopted the mix of instruction and aphorisms to achieve success in reaching reluctant students. While this was happening, a parallel phenomenon was taking place. Case law grew into an authoritative body of knowledge aiding judicial decisions. By the second century BCE, law and wisdom were brought together as one.[8] Provisional authority of parents and teachers, grounded in experience, now became absolute, teachings viewed as divinely ordained. This new stance conflicted with learning from experience alone.

A purely objective approach to existence misses hidden truth that transcends sight and sound, the two avenues to knowledge. Sages quickly added another path to understanding that involves the emotions of interpersonal relationships, the ups and downs of daily life. At the same time, they were fully aware of the dangers posed by extreme passion. To be truly wise, one must navigate verbalized inner responses to success and loss, health and sickness, friendship and alienation, and confirmation of comforting belief and its collapse. Together, the two approaches, objective and subjective, helped receptive individuals become a little wiser.

One can say that wonder is the heartbeat of wisdom, awe, and amazement over the mystery of the universe about which even God in the book of Job could not remain silent.[9] Majestic creatures with mysterious names like Behemoth and Leviathan fill the sea and marshes, fearless stallions eagerly await combat, agile mountain goats roam freely, and birds soar high above them all. The attraction of the human body, the beauty of an infant's smile, the endurance of parental love enabling a child to experience life's excitement – these wonders and more defy description. So does healing that takes place when family and friends gather around the table for a meal. Belief in divine creation lies at the center of wisdom, as do the wonders of the good earth. These things needed to be conveyed to the young.

Because biblical wisdom was deeply influenced by similar texts from Mesopotamia and Egypt, where polytheism reigned, a brief survey of these ancient texts and their impact on Israel's sages may partially explain why sages found it difficult to adjust to the introduction of revelation into rational discourse.

[8] James L. Crenshaw, "Law in the Wisdom Tradition," 289–307 in Pamela Barmash, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Law* (Oxford: University Press, 2019).

[9] William P. Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).

The earliest instructions, Suruppak (attributed to Ziusudra, the Sumerian hero of the flood), and Kagemni, said to be the work of a Pharaoh Ptahhotep (twenty-fifth century BCE) consist of advice and motivation. The maxims about basic virtues, expressed in a realistic tone, are expected to be passed on to the next generation. The addressee, "my son," occurs often, lending the teachings paternal authority.[10] The authority of these texts, however, rested on their ability to pass the test of time, bringing success as promised. Professional scribes took on an aura of authority, threatening lazy or disinterested students with harsh physical punishment. A sage named Ahiqar, mentioned in the Book of Tobit, whose sayings are partially preserved in Aramaic, compares whippings to manure in a garden.[11]

Sages did not hesitate to discuss the frailties of the body. Ironically, Ptahhotep's first words from the cradle of the second major genre in Egypt, behind Autobiography, as it were, complain about the unpleasantness of old age.

> O King, my Lord! Age is here, old age arrived,
> Feebleness came, weakness grows, childlike one sleeps all day. Eyes are dim, ears deaf. Strength is waning through weariness. The mouth, silenced, speaks not. The heart, void, recalls not the past. The bones ache throughout. Good has become evil, all taste is gone. What age does to people is evil in everything. The nose, clogged, breathes not; painful are standing and sitting.[12]

The authoritative voice, either that of a ruler or a parent, drowns out that of those to whom teachings were addressed, with only two known exceptions. The son in the Akkadian *Instruction of Shurpe Ameli* responds irreverently, and Khonshotep, Anii's son, says his father sets before him a difficult path, an ideal that may be beyond reach. It appears that the objection was introduced to be refuted. Anii tells Khonshotep that wild beasts can be domesticated and people who speak a different language can learn Egyptian. Even crooked sticks can be straightened, he adds. It seems that Anii understood what *Papyrus Insinger* put into words: "No instruction can succeed if there is dislike" (8:24).[13]

Where instruction took place is unclear. Some scholars use meager evidence of early writing to suggest that widespread schools existed in Israel despite the absence of any reference to schools until the second century. Even this remark by Ben Sira has been understood as an allusion to the book he left for posterity

[10] Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), 63–80.

[11] See Seth A. Bledsoe, "Ahiqar and Other Legendary Sages," 289–309 in Samuel L. Adams and Matthew Goff, eds. *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Wisdom Literature* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2020) and James M. Lindenberger, *The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1998).

[12] Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature,* 3, 192. [13] 13 Ibid., Vol. 1, 62–63.

("Draw near to me, you who are untaught, and lodge in my school," Sir 51:23). It is likely that a few scribes were able to train enough young boys for royal administration during the short time before the fall of Jerusalem. Formal education for all was long in coming.[14]

Instructions and maxims were based on experience, but life always brings exceptions to every supposed rational rule. Undesirable consequences are also the result of experience, which teaches us that such a rule for coping with eventualities can never be found with absolute certainty. One must always be open to new experiences. Because the stakes are so high, enthusiasts run the risk of dogmatic rigidity. Sages were not oblivious to this danger.

There is evidence of the sages' perspective concerning the deity in these texts. For example, realists among the sages questioned the optimism behind instructions and even divine justice, leading to vanity literature, the consequence of intellectual freedom among literati. *The Babylonian Theodicy* (eleventh century BCE) consists of twenty-seven stanzas of eleven lines each. It pursues the question that haunts the biblical Job and concludes that one cannot know the will of the gods.

> The mind of the god, like the center of the heavens, is remote;
> Knowledge of it is very difficult; people cannot know it . . . .
> Narru . . . and majestic Zulummar . . . and goddess Mami . . .
> Gave twisted speech to the human race.
> With lies, and not truth, they endowed them forever.[15]

The same theme is taken up in *Ludlul,* also known as *I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom*.

> I wish I knew that these things would be pleasing to one's god!
> What is good for oneself may be offense to one's god.
> What in one's own heart seems despicable may be proper to one's god.
> Who can know the will of the gods in heaven?
> Who can understand the plans of the underworld gods?
> Where have humans learned the way of a god?[16]

The consequence of this epistemology is dire, for it undercuts the sages' pedagogy. The irony of praising the Lord of Wisdom while acknowledging that humans are clueless about the will of the gods is poignant. Will reason's restraint lead to humility? This awareness of the limits to reasons' capabilities

[14] See James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence*. ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1998). For schools, see 85–113, pedagogy, 115–138, resistance to learning, 139–185, the language for intellectual achievement, 205–219.

[15] Norman B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1969), 267.

[16] Ibid., 266.