



The Old Testament Wisdom Books and the Modern Human

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Abstract

In this article, I will examine a subject that may help modern people to think differently about the Old Testament texts. Modern humans, carried away by the fast, intense, and demanding pace of everyday life and the wholly materialistic setting of modern times, seek happiness in the acquisition and accumulation of goods and in the demonstration of a happy life. This happiness, however, is proven plasmatic/fake as human tries to cover this inflating emotional void by creating a vicious circle. To this point comes the Old Testament with its Wisdom Books (Psalms, Job, Song of Songs, Wisdom of Solomon, and Ben Sira/Sirach – according to the Septuagint translation) to help humans by orienting their interest to the care of their souls. Those biblical texts are full of teachings about daily and personal life, relationships with others, and human inner conflicts. Old Testament texts are always topical and able to help contemporary humans to redefine their relationship with themselves and others by guiding them to be mentally healthy personalities. In examining the topic, I will explain in a few words the themes that every Wisdom book discusses in order to demonstrate their application in modern life.

Keywords: Bible; existential questions; modern human; psychology; Wisdom literature

1. Introduction

Although today the Old Testament Wisdom literature texts would be characterized as old-fashioned, they could connect with our era because their teachings concern a wide range of existential questions that trouble the modern human in recent years. Thus, through the study and the re-approach of such ancient texts, it is possible to be paved a way for cooperation between biblical studies and other contemporary sciences (e.g., psychology, psychiatry).

It seems that in modern, totally secularized societies, religion has no place; however, existential questions such as “*What really matters?*” but also concepts like *happiness* and *Wisdom*, that have already been set in the Judeo-Christian thought many years ago, come to the fore again (Lemmelijn, 2018). As Collicutt (2012) says, this always topical position of the biblical texts is justified by the fact that those texts have been written by people for people, functioning as a trigger that provokes a specific reaction to every reader.

This article will examine whether biblical texts, especially the Old Testament, can find common ground with the science of psychology, in the interest of modern humans. For a better

understanding, we will first make a brief reference to basic concepts, such as the term *Wisdom* in the Old Testament and in its Wisdom literature books. Furthermore, the situation of the modern human, who is captivated by their existential questions, will also be presented. For this purpose, studies on the connection between religiosity and mental health will be used.

2. Wisdom literature, contemporary human, and modern sciences.

2.1 The meaning of *Wisdom* in the Old Testament

As it is already known, the Wisdom literature genre is found in many ancient civilizations, and it is the most international and cosmopolitan genre both in its structure and its content. At first, *Wisdom* was considered to belong exclusively in the realm of the deity, but gradually the interest shifted to human *Wisdom* (Dumbravă, 2017). According to Dumbravă (2017), the first to deal with these issues were the ancient Greek philosophers, and in the field of psychology, *Wisdom* gradually attracted more and more interest from researchers.

In the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, *Wisdom* is closely connected to the discernment, the understanding, and the splendor of someone's heart (1 Kgs. 3:12, 4:29) but also with the "*fear of God*" (Ps. 111:10. See also Prov. 1:1) (Lloyd, 2012). For Lemmelijn (2018), *Wisdom* is closely linked to a specific lifestyle where people, substantially, live a life oriented to God, while the core of the Wisdom literature is the quest for living a life full of meaning. In this way of living, God is the origin and the horizon.

One of the most important concepts associated with *Wisdom* is doubtless "*the fear of God*", the content of which seems to be exceptionally rich. The phrase "*Fear of God/Lord*" defines the meaning of concepts such as surprise, astonishment, holy awe, decency, respect, piety, honor, worship, and the praising of God (Karagiannis, 2018). *Fear of God* is also the beginning of knowledge (1:7. 29, 2:5) and *Wisdom* (9:10, 15:33), but also the dissociation from evil (Adu-Gyamfi, 2024), the so-called righteousness (Lemmelijn, 2018). Exceptionally interesting is the fact that the "*Fear of God/Lord*" is a concept that can appear at any stage of someone's life, whether someone is a believer or not (Karagiannis, 2018).

Essentially, as Clements (1998) notes, *Wisdom* impelled the Israelite religion to become more rational in order not to be dominated to such a large extent by the fear of the daemonic forces or the non-moral uncleanness, by forming the prevailing characteristics, the principles of the Israelite-Jewish religious thinking.

2.2 The Old Testament Wisdom books

The title "Wisdom Literature" refers to the Old Testament books that belong to the Poetic or Didactic books of the Greek translation of the Septuagint (LXX) and to the *Writings* (*Ketuvim*, *Kethubim*) section of the Hebrew Bible (Masoretic Text). According to LXX translation the Wisdom books are the following: i) Psalms (Ps.), ii) Job (Job), iii) Proverbs (Prov.), iv) Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth (Eccl.), v) Song of Songs or Canticles (Song or Cant.), vi) Wisdom of Solomon (Wisd.) and vii) Ben Sira or Sirach (Sir.). The last two of them, Wisdom of Solomon and Ben Sira, have only been adopted by the Christian tradition and are included in the Deutero-canonical Books or Apocrypha since the Jewish tradition rejected them.

2.2.1 Psalms:

This book consists of 150 Psalms, which are divided into three main genres according to the main emotion they express. Thus, the main categories formed are: i) hymns of joy, ii) lamentations, and iii) hymns of thanksgiving (Longman & Dillard, 2006). A subcategory of the above is the *Wisdom Psalms*, which received this title due to the fact that they feature common subjects and concerns with the rest of the Old Testament Wisdom books (e.g., Ps. 1:6, 119, 45, 73) (Longman & Dillard, 2006).

In general, the Book of Psalms could be characterized as a rich source of theological teachings and reflection, and, despite the fact that it develops a systematic theology, it constitutes a “*microcosm*” of the teaching of the whole Old Testament (Longman & Dillard, 2006).

2.2.2 Job:

This book, which consists of 42 chapters, recounts in dialogical form the story of Job. The main character is described as a man who owns animals, land, and many servants (Job 1:3) (Longman & Dillard, 2006). Later in his story, Job devolves into lamenting his fate, even wondering why he was born. Overwhelmed by distressing thoughts, he brings to mind the past welfare in which he lived (Job 29), but now God has turned his eyes away from him (30:20).

Core of the book of Job seems to be the question “*who is wise?*”, which runs through the whole book but, also, the main character and his friends present themselves as sources of *Wisdom*, leading to the ridicule of the meaning of *Wisdom* (11:12; 12:1–3, 12; 13:12; 15:1–13) (Longman & Dillard, 2006). The answer to the above question is finally given by God himself by appearing in Job in the form of a storm and by asking him in order to prove to him that He is the wise one. The book closes with the reconciliation between Job and God, as the main character demonstrated repentance instead of arrogance towards Him (Job 42).

In our days, Job is a person who has lost his former prosperity, falls from grace, and, reflecting his degradation, accuses God of the situation he lives in. Although Job considers himself not blameless, he has not committed anything that justifies God’s attitude toward him, whom he considers to have forgotten him.

An interesting part of Job’s history is the fact that he is not of Israelite provenance, but a foreigner, something indicating that God is not restricted in the narrow boundaries of His people, by not excluding the foreigners from a relationship with Him (Moberly, 2015).

2.2.3 Proverbs:

This book consists of 31 chapters, includes good and practical advice or observations for life, presented from a humanistic perspective rather than from a divine authority (e.g., Prov. 10:1), due to the absence of explicit reference to God (Longman & Dillard, 2006).

It is interesting to note that in the book of Proverbs, *Wisdom* is personified by taking the shape of a woman who speaks for her personality and her virtues (Prov. 8:2-21) (McEntire, 2013). In the same way, the opposite concept, the *Folly* ones, is personified in the 9th chapter of the book under consideration/examination. The second one, the *Folly*, has the form of an attractive woman who misleads *the naive young men who are walking by on the path of life*, by inviting them to dine with her and leading them to death (Prov. 9:18) (Longman & Dillard, 2006).

It is worth noting that Coogan (1999) marks that *Wisdom* is also presented as a feminine deity in the following texts: Prov. 1-9, Wis. 7-9, Sir. 24, Baruch 3:9–4:4, but also at the 42nd chapter of the book of Enoch.

2.2.4 Ecclesiastes:

This book consists of 12 chapters, depicting in a completely different way from the rest of the Old Testament Wisdom literature books, the teachings that are transmitted. Ecclesiastes is astonished by the prosperity of the wicked and the distress of the righteous. He is unable to believe how it is possible for the righteous not to prosper and for the wicked not to woe (Sanders, 2015).

The book of Ecclesiastes holds a pessimistic attitude toward life (Eccl. 1:2, 12:8) in contrast to the book of Proverbs, which praises the concepts of *Wisdom*, family life, and longevity (Prov. 3:13-18). Qoheleth seems to resemble the book of Job in terms of structure, but results in the

conclusion that humans must respect God (*Fear of God*) and comply with His commandments because He is the judge of all the people (Eccl. 12:13-14) (Longman & Dillard, 2006).

2.2.5 Song of Songs:

This book consists of 8 chapters. According to its literal interpretation, Song presents the love story of a young couple who experience intense feelings of love and, despite the various obstacles, they struggle to meet each other (Helmer et al., 2019). On the other hand, according to its allegorical interpretation, the book of Song portrays the love relationship between God and His people, who are personified in the main roles of the bride (Israelite people) and the lover (God) (Zakovitch & Zakovitch, 2019).

The Song of Songs, presents, in a delicate manner, the relationship between the bride and the lover, highlighting, through its descriptions, the uniqueness of the beloved one (Davis, 2000) but, also the significance of having a well-balanced relationship with someone in the shaping of a complete personality (i.e. how somebody gets on well with him/herself, when he/she has a balanced life). In addition, the book of Songs promotes human values such as mutual respect and admiration for each other, important elements that strengthen and develop a relationship (either love or just a human one).

2.2.6 Wisdom of Solomon:

This book, which consisted of 19 chapters, has not survived in the Hebrew language but only in Hellenistic Greek, and for this reason, it is not included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible books (Wright, 1990). The book of the Wisdom of Solomon deals with the concept of the transition from life to death or from life to nonexistence. Furthermore, as Green (2003) notes, in the book there is also a reference to the survival of the 1st century AD Jewish community in Alexandria. Equally interesting is the fact that the vocabulary of the above book shows a strong influence of its contemporary Hellenistic philosophy, religion, and science (Wright, 1990).

In the Wisdom of Solomon, *Wisdom* is not personified as in the books of Proverbs and Ben Sira; instead, it is presented in a silent, ethereal form (6:12, 7:22, 7:25) and without being attributed a masculine, feminine, or neuter gender designation (Webster, 1998). Here, *Wisdom* is the mother of all the good deeds (7:12) but, also, more precious than a treasure (7:8-12) and stands as an intermediary between God and humans (7:25) (Webster, 1998).

2.2.7 Ben Sira:

This book consists of 51 chapters and was originally written in the Hebrew language, but the text survived only in the Hellenistic Greek language translated version (Beentjes, 2015). The book of Ben Sira discusses about the basic/vital needs that human should cover, such as water, bread, clothing and, a house (29:21). The list of the necessary for living seems to be enriched in a following chapter of the book (39:25-27), something that, according to Crenshaw (2007), shows an evolution in lifestyle and, perhaps a transition from the rural life to the city life.

According to Murphy and Carm (1990), it seems that from the above Old Testament books, the kind of *Wisdom* that seems to be the broadest and most common is *experiential Wisdom*. This type of *Wisdom* concerns humans' reaction to their environment, in an attempt to understand it and to cope with it.

3. The modern human

In our days, people are disoriented by the contemporary lifestyle (intense rates of daily life, multi-tasking, over-consumption, etc.) and have to cope with many existential questions which they either ignore or do not try to resolve, thus failing to find answers to issues that concern them. Those who identify the issues in themselves, turn to diverse professionals (e.g.

psychologists, life coaches, yoga instructors) or search for various online resources (e.g. psychology advisory articles), to find answers to their questions and thus try to achieve concentration and also psychic and mental well-being through the union of body, soul, and mind (Lemmelijn, 2018).

The answers to their questions can be found in a plethora of studies examining the relationship between religiosity and mental health. In general, many studies have shown that religiosity constitutes an important aspect of contemporary humans, while it is positively connected to mental health (Papaleontiou-Louca, 2024). Furthermore, it has been proven that faith and the sense of meaning in life are necessary for positive development, adaptation, and support for adolescents in difficult circumstances (Papanikolopoulos & Kaprinis, 2021). Additionally, of interest is the study conducted by Howie and his colleagues (2024) on the relationship between religiosity and mental health, which showed that religious people were more receptive to alternative therapies. Another study, that of Gontijo et al. (2022), has shown that although religious and atheist individuals experience similar levels of anxiety and depression, the former reported greater happiness and meaning in life. Particularly impressive is the fact that religious activities have a very positive impact on patients who are not very religious (Papanikolopoulos & Kaprinis, 2021).

In this line of thinking, Jarvis notes that through his research, he has concluded that all theologies answer the question of “*why? (this happens)*”. As a result, when someone is forced to answer in questions as “how” and “why”, it starts a process of learning and discovering answers that will help someone to regain a sense of harmony with the world (Jarvis, 2011). In an effort to achieve this harmony, it is evident that more religious people use healthier strategies to handle forgiveness, proving that forgiveness of self and others has a strong religious base (Upenieks et al., 2024). This attainment of harmony could be realized via spirituality, which leads to surpassing oneself through self-control and emotional balance (Dubey et al., 2025).

This need for mental and physical peace seems to have been detected centuries ago by humans, as it can be concluded from the biblical and ancient Greek philosophy texts. Returning to the question, the Old Testament offers a meaningful suggestion for well-being by encouraging people to practice being just and to fear God. When someone adopts the above lifestyle, they will be guided in a state named “*shalom*” (= peace), i.e., an inner and outer harmony (Lemmelijn, 2018). Furthermore, as Proverbs (3:15-18) has been declared, *Wisdom* holds the key to well-being and longevity (Adu-Gyamfi, 2024). The above has been proven by Wang and his colleagues in their research, which mentions that *God Standards had a significant positive correlation with religious commitment, and God discrepancy had a significant negative correlation with religious commitment.* (Duffield et al., 2024).

4. The Old Testament Wisdom Literature and modern scientific approaches

At first sight, the impediment of the biblical texts seems to be detected in the fact that they have been written in a rather early period, something that does not allow “them” to be connected to the present-day reality. This important issue above, Collicutt (2012) names as “*anachronism*” and points out that perhaps research has over-stressed it.

In trying to explain anachronism, in a paper of hers, Collicutt notes that, according to it, modern sciences cannot study ancient (here biblical) texts as they were written in a very early period and portray a quite distant era. However, the fact that human behavior seems not to have changed since early times may provide a second chance to modern sciences in reapproaching the ancient and, especially, the biblical texts (Collicutt, 2012).

According to Enns (2009), a first attempt to approach was made in the 1980s and onwards, when *Wisdom* took on a new meaning in both theology and psychology. For Collicutt, a kind

of re-approach between Freudian psychoanalysis and biblical studies began in the 1970s as the above school's depth psychologies were more moderate and versatile regarding/with regards to religion. This situation culminated in the establishment of a Psychology and Biblical Studies Section of the Society of Biblical Literature in 1998. It is interesting that, even relatively recently (2012), the approaches of the science of psychology are not common in the field of the academic study of the Bible (Collicutt, 2012).

This difficulty, along with the long-lasting attempt of reapproaching between biblical studies and mainstream "psychologies" cannot be attributed to the antipathy of biblical scholars towards these psychologies, but to the fact that the former (i.e., biblical scholars) are unaware of the existence of the latter (i.e., mainstream psychologies), as Collicutt (2012) argues. The most important step, however, in evaluating the usefulness of the science of psychology in approaching the Bible, is the identification of the kind of psychology we mean/need (e.g., cognitive, social, developmental, evolutionary, biological, or personality psychology).

An important effect of the above unawareness in contemporary Christian communities is the fact that the humanities could be seen as a prolongation of the empirical *Wisdom* of the book of Proverbs, with a result in the use of the science of psychology in pastoral ministry, as Steinberg notes. Although this potential cooperation has proved quite helpful in our days, there is a reluctance to accept the scientific viewpoint towards ecclesiastical or religious matters (Steinberg, 2019). According to Steinberg (2019), a cooperation like this could be based on the faith principle of the book of Proverbs 1:7 (LXX) («*Ἀρχὴ σοφίας φόβος θεοῦ*»).

According to Lloyd (2012), the distance between biblical studies and Psychology does not seem real, as the concept of religious maturity is not foreign to the sciences of Psychology and Psychiatry. Thus, comparing biblical studies with Psychology, there is a similarity between them, as in order to acquire the *Wisdom* skill, one must practically integrate the dimensions of cognition, reflection, and emotion.

In the case of the Bible, everything is focused on the theological section as people: i) the wise one, interpret experience theologically, ii) they fear God and live in *whole holiness*, according to God's covenant, and iii) they follow Jesus Christ, who is the *Wisdom's cruciform embodiment* (Enns, 2009). Furthermore, the uniqueness of the Old Testament texts could be based on the fact that "no one is alone" and everyone is either linked to others or to nature/world. On the other hand, the science of psychology seems to be more individualistic and centered on the person itself (Lemmelijn, 2018). Moreover, the great importance of connecting each person with the others, a distinctive aspect of religiosity, helps people to turn away from themselves and their problems and toward others, thus enhancing mental well-being and balancing love for oneself and others, while also strengthening the sense of belonging (Papaleontiou-Louca, 2024).

In general, lots of research have shown the strong connection between intrinsic religiosity and positive mental health. Such an example is the research conducted by Reynolds and his colleagues in 2020, which studied the intrinsic religiosity as a mediator in the relationship between social disconnectedness and meaning in life. Similarly, Milevski in 2017 discovered a notable connection between intrinsic religiosity, self-esteem, and satisfaction from life (Duffield et al., 2024). The above can be ascertained by scientific research (Syed's in 2003 and Daaleman's in 2004) affirming that belief in God can contribute to physical and mental health, as people who resort to faith activate pathways for self-healing (Amedome & Bedi, 2019). However, in 2015, Szafranski's study showed that health professionals often either minimize or understand as pathological the role of faith and spirituality (Pastwa-Wojciechowska et al., 2021).

More specifically, while studying *Wisdom* in the context of Psychology, the following question emerges: “*But, how could Wisdom be related to modern human?*”. As Dumbravă (2017) notes, research has shown that *Wisdom* is associated with better decision-making, better reasoning, and actions, thus contributing to a happy life. As a result, *Wisdom* seems to contribute to whether someone is happy or not.

The above finding was confirmed by studies that investigated the concept of *Wisdom* by revealing that it is positively related to mental health, satisfaction with life, and to someone’s ability to adapt to social and physical decline and to near-death experiences (Dumbravă, 2017). The consequence of the connection between *Wisdom* and mental health is *self-knowledge*, which in turn can cause *self-control*, the one that biblical writers see as something integral to *Wisdom* and maturity (Lloyd, 2012). This *self-knowledge* and *self-control* can lead to the practice of *forgiveness*, either of oneself or others, with higher levels of it to be associated with *greater psychosocial well-being and less psychological distress*, leading to better mental health, stress prevention, higher social integration, even lower incidence of disease and mortality (Upenieks et al., 2024).

In this line of thought, Dumbravă (2017) notes that the benefits that *Wisdom* may provide to the wise could be a valuable field for research into the factors involved in resilience and, especially, in coping with a traumatic or negative event by helping to avoid experiencing intense emotions, such as depression and anxiety. According to Darvyri et al., in a study of theirs in 2018, it has been proven that religious spirituality helps people to better managing of the different anxious situations of their everyday life (Papaleontiou-Louca, 2024).

5. Conclusion

Based on what was presented above, it seems that the Old Testament Wisdom literature is not completely integrated into the mindset of the modern human, who prefers to look for answers in modern sciences, such as psychology or even psychiatry. The relatively recent research, however, has shown that these two disciplines, biblical studies and the science of psychology, can overcome any obstacle, either real or false, and can cooperate to the benefit of the modern human.

The Old Testament text, although old-fashioned; however, can provide the answers that every human seeks to the existential questions that tantalize him/her. Thus, this text, although much earlier than today’s scientific research (e.g., psychology studies), seems to have already laid the foundations, along with Hellenistic philosophy, as Old Testament texts contain answers to existential questions that concern humans of every era throughout time.

According to the above ascertainments that arise from the examination of the biblical texts and from the study of various psychology treatises, one can come to the conclusion that someone can find the answers to issues that concern them simply by referring to the Old Testament texts. By following this, modern humans will be able to look into their souls and restore the relationship either with himself/herself and with others, providing themselves with a quality of life. Finally, the answers that Old Testament Wisdom literature gives to humans’ existential questions are substantial and not superficial, leading them to a complete internal and external transformation.

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