

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 29-Part 2

Solomon and Wisdom

Hebrew review *Aleph - Cheyt*

When you were growing up, did you ever imagine finding Aladdin's magical lamp? I certainly did! This was the lamp that, when rubbed, produced a genie that would grant the holder three wishes.

I remember thinking, "well, of course the first wish would be for some greater number of wishes." The next mental leap was to remember to always save the last wish as the vehicle to wish for more wishes. Now that never seemed like it should work, yet as I was told the story, there were no limits on whether the wish could be for more wishes. Since that time, I should add, Disney produced the movie "Aladdin" where Robin Williams, as the voice of the genie, explained that you could not use a wish to get more wishes.

I suspect that most children play the same mental game. I can say that at some time or another, most, if not all, of our five children came to me and asked for a "favor." If/when I said "yes," they would immediately reply, "The favor I want is for you to give me five more favors!" Moral to story: never say "yes" to a request for a favor without first finding out what the favor is!

This childhood experience comes to my mind this week as we study Solomon and wisdom. We will explain "why" at the end of this lesson! Before that, however, we need to examine the story of God's giving Solomon wisdom, along with a review of what is and is not "wisdom" within the Biblical context.

Wisdom is an important concept in the Bible, in Biblical studies, and in discipleship. In the Old Testament, there is an entire section of writing that scholars classify as "wisdom literature."¹ There are long passages devoted to wisdom, including Proverbs 8 which speaks of wisdom personified as a female teacher who "speaks noble things" and gives "instruction" and "knowledge" that are more valuable than gold and silver. Proverbs 8 adds that wisdom was possessed by the Lord "at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old" (Pro. 8:22).

In the New Testament, James wrote of wisdom. In the opening of his letter, he urges his readers, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him" (James 1:5). He

¹ While we will reference some of these in this lesson, our classes centering on the main wisdom

distinguished wisdom “from above” from that which is “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” (James 3:15). Paul wrote similarly that God made “foolish the wisdom of the world” using Christ who is the “wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:18-25).

Considering the Biblical importance of wisdom, it behooves us to study it in further detail. Perhaps the best place to start is the story of Solomon seeking and receiving wisdom from God.

SOLOMON AND WISDOM

In 1 Kings 3, we begin exploring Solomon and God’s gift of “wisdom.” As we consider this lesson, it is helpful to set aside preconceived notions of both the story and the meanings of words like “wisdom” briefly in order to then weigh what we read with what we think we already understand. The story is set within the context of Solomon’s rise to power. Before the story, Solomon had his adversaries and challengers to the throne killed. Solomon has also commenced his political reign by marrying the daughter of Pharaoh.² The text notes Solomon’s love for the LORD, and places him in Gibeon, where he has gone to offer God sacrifices.

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you." And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you. And you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?"

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days. And if you will walk in my ways, keeping

² Which Pharaoh? That question and others like it are saved for a later lesson that will incorporate this story into the historical and archaeological record of the period.

my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days." (1 Kings 3:5-14).

As we inspect this story, we note several significant items. First, God is not a genie. He does not promise to give Solomon a wish, nor does he promise to grant a request. God simply instructs Solomon to ask for what Solomon would have God give to him. One can easily see that if Solomon had asked for something outrageous, God could have simply said, "No! What is more, because you asked for *abc*, which is something outrageous, I will also deny you *xyz*!" Scripture never portrays God as someone who can be bound to the will of man.

This should caution people who have a temptation to declare God *must* do one thing or another, as if by his or her own actions they have bound God contrary to God's will. God's actions proceed from his character, not from our will. This is one reason it is important to *know* God, and not simply know about God.

Another important point in this text is the reply and request of Solomon. If one were to ask ten regular church attenders, without the story immediately before any of them, "what did Solomon ask for?" a good percentage would likely answer, "wisdom." The Wikipedia entry on "wisdom" says the same thing:

In the [Christian Bible](#) and [Jewish](#) scripture, wisdom is represented by the sense of justice of the lawful and wise king [Solomon](#), who asks God for wisdom in [1 Kings 3](#).

Close examination of the 1 Kings text, however, reveals that Solomon himself did not use that word. Solomon asked God for,

...an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil.

God is the one who in reply said he was giving Solomon a "wise and discerning mind."

Solomon's actual request is in the context of his predicament. Most scholars believe he was likely around twenty years old,³ and he was now sole ruler over Israel. Solomon was bright enough to know he was in over his head! This was not a job that Solomon got on his own accord. It was a job that God gave him. Solomon knew as much and confessed it:

O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of David my father.

³ See, e.g., Keil, C. F. and Delitzsch, F., *Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 3, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles*, (Hendrickson edition 2006) at 31.

While God placed Solomon in the job of king, Solomon was not qualified to adequately do that job! As Solomon said,

I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of your people whom you have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude.

Of course, the age of 20 was not “a little child.” Solomon’s expression was one of humility. In essence he was saying, “Lord, you have made me king, but I am a baby! I am way too young to know how to do this!” Solomon adds that sentiment with the phrase, “I do not know how to go out or come in.” Solomon knew he was missing the necessary skills of leadership.⁴

As related in 1 Kings, Solomon’s prayer to God was not simply, “Please give me wisdom.” What Solomon said was, “God, you have set me in a task that I do not have the ability to do. Please give me what I need so I can do what you have called me to do!”

Since Solomon’s direct request was for:

1. an “understanding mind” (literally a “listening heart”) to govern God’s people,
2. an ability to “discern between good and evil” also to aid him in governing⁵,

and since God replied that he would give Solomon a wise mind, then perhaps one might think that wisdom is the equivalent to the two things Solomon sought, an understanding mind and an ability to discern between good and evil. This idea might be further reinforced by the parallel account provided in the narrative of 2 Chronicles. As 2 Chronicles 1:10 reads, Solomon asked,

Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people, for who can govern this people of yours, which is so great.

⁴ The phrase, “go out and come in” was a Hebrew expression used many times in the Bible as a reference to “knowing what was going on and being able to lead in that regard.” As Moses was informed he would no longer lead Israel, he asked God to appoint one who would, “go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in” (Num. 27:17). Moses explained his lack of ability to lead the people using the same phrase: “I am 120 years old today. I am no longer able to go out and come in. The LORD has said to me, ‘You shall not go over this Jordan.’ (Dt. 31:2). When Saul made David a leader and commander, the phrase was used: “So Saul removed him from his presence and made him a commander of a thousand. And he went out and came in before the people” (2 Sam. 18:13).

⁵ This might be seen as one request, with the discernment between good and evil being what Solomon meant by an understanding mind.

We are leaving aside for another lesson the relationship between the accounts in Kings and in Chronicles. Our focus right now turns on the word and idea of “wisdom” as that term is used in this passage and beyond. For us to more fairly understand what wisdom is and what Solomon sought, a further word study is necessary to more fully understand the idea.

WISDOM IN SCRIPTURE (A WORD STUDY)

As we study a word in Scripture, there are many great tools and resources available both online and at your favorite neighborhood theological library! Operating simply at home, one can use a concordance or go online to a website like www.BibleGateway.com and enter a word for a search. Entering “wisdom” in the English Standard Version of the search box for the BibleGateway site produces 211 verses with the word “wisdom” in them. Reading each of these verses would give a good thorough idea of the different ways “wisdom” is used in Scripture.

If we were to take the search in BibleGateway and change to the New International Version, the number of places where “wisdom” occurs jumps to 219! The additional 8 verses certainly clues one in that something is going on. That something is relatively simple. “Wisdom” is used to translate different words in the Bible. Further complicating the picture, we can add that “wisdom” is not the only word used to translate some of the words in question.

To more thoroughly study “wisdom” in the Bible, we can go to several other resources. One resource is a good Bible dictionary. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, for example is a six-volume work that has an eleven-page entry on “Wisdom in the Old Testament.”⁶ This entry breaks down “wisdom” into an organized structure with footnotes and references. The entry does not assume knowledge of the original Hebrew (or Greek in the New Testament), but does assume a basic understanding of Old Testament studies. Another well-regarded work is the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.⁷

Aside from the resources which require only English, there are a number of useful books that thoroughly dissect “wisdom” using the original languages. Books like Jenni and Westermann’s *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*⁸ and

⁶ Freedman, David Noel, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (Doubleday 1992), V. 6.

⁷ Bromily, Geoffrey, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Eerdmans 1997), V. 4.

⁸ Jenni, Ernst and Westermann, Claus, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Hendrickson 1997), V. 1.

Botterweck and Ringgren's *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*⁹ both give solid entries that trace the use of the core Hebrew word for wisdom (חכמה-*chokhmah*) in the Old Testament, as well as in the other related languages outside the Bible.

A thorough word study on wisdom would look at not only these references, but also works which dedicate all or a part of their analysis to the term. An established treatise on this subject is James Crenshaw's *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*.¹⁰

A study into "wisdom" in the Old Testament produces several matters worth noting in this abbreviated word study:

- **"Wisdom" was a concern in contemporary societies outside of Israel**

Archaeology has uncovered tablets that indicate wisdom was a concern among the Egyptians south of Israel as well as Mesopotamian societies north of Israel. The Egyptians had teaching texts that were directed at training people in order, justice and truth. Among the proverbs and precepts of ancient Egypt are the Instruction Texts of Pharaoh Amen-em-opet. Most scholars date the initial production of these texts prior to the time of Solomon.¹¹ A portion of this Egyptian work is often noted as closely related and perhaps a source material for some of Proverbs 22:17-23:14.¹²

⁹ Botterweck, G. J. and Ringgren, Helmer, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans 1983), V. 4.

¹⁰ Crenshaw, James L., *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, 3d. ed., (Westminster John Knox 2010).

¹¹ Toronto Egyptologist Ronald Williams dates the text as 1200-1100 BC. See "The Sage in Egyptian Literature" in Gammie, John and Perdue, Leo, *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, (Eisenbrauns 1990), at 23.

¹² Some evangelicals initially recoil over the idea that some portions of the Old Testament might have as a source material writings from other cultures. Such is not surprising really. Solomon took a princess of Egypt as a wife. Israel lived in and among the Egyptians for hundreds of years. There is nothing surprising that Solomon or other Israelites would have learned the wisdom of others. Similarly, it does not invalidate the premise of inspiration for God to have used such literature selectively in Scripture. Egyptologist James Hoffmeier teaches his students that 1 Kings 4:30 ("so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt") implies that Solomon had access to and knew of Egyptian Wisdom, perhaps through his marriage to Pharaoh's daughter. Reader Steve Taylor adds, "God has manifested himself to mankind through nature and the conscience he placed in every man so that we might seek him out and know him. He has also set certain principles into place that govern the way the universe exists. For man to recognize some of those does not mean that man is the originator of the concept – he simply recognized what God had chosen to reveal. That God wants an orderly

Compare, for example, these passages from The Instruction of Amen-em-opet¹³ with the similar Proverbs passages:

The Instruction of Amen-em-opet	Proverbs
Give thy ears, hear what is said, Give thy heart to understand them. To put them in thy heart is worth while. (1:9-11)	Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to my knowledge, for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you. (22:17-18)
Guard thyself against robbing the oppressed And against overbearing the disabled. (2:1-2)	Do not rob the poor, because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate. (22:22)
Do not carry off the landmark at the boundaries of the arable land (6:1)	Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set. (22:28)

The ideas of seeking and wanting wisdom, even if known as simple instructions in justice and truth are ideas that Solomon would have seen in other cultures and other leaders.

- **The most common Hebrew word for “wisdom” has a broad and diverse meaning.**

Proverbs 8 and 2 Chronicles 1:10 use the same Hebrew word for wisdom, *chokmah* (חכמה). In both cases, the word seems well translated as our English word “wisdom.” We easily understand the passages that speak of wisdom in a special divine or spiritual sense. For example, Proverbs 30:3 equates wisdom with “knowledge of the Holy One.” Proverbs 9 is built around the contrast of wisdom with folly:

The Way of Wisdom

Wisdom has built her house;
 she has hewn her seven pillars.
 She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine;
 she has also set her table.
 She has sent out her young women to call
 from the highest places in the town,
 "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!"

universe with principles that apply to all creatures should not surprise us. In fact, it should comfort us that God has done so much to help whet our appetite to know him.”

¹³ Pritchard, James B., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, (Princeton 1969), at 421ff.

To him who lacks sense she says,
"Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Leave your simple ways, and live,
and walk in the way of insight."

...

The Way of Folly

The woman Folly is loud;
she is seductive and knows nothing.
She sits at the door of her house;
she takes a seat on the highest places of the town,
calling to those who pass by,
who are going straight on their way,
"Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!"
And to him who lacks sense she says,
"Stolen water is sweet,
and bread eaten in secret is pleasant."
But he does not know that the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

Solomon's wisdom was also linked to his learning and knowledge. In this sense, his wisdom was a part of his knowledge of "3,000 proverbs" and "1,005 songs" (1 Kings 4:32). Solomon learned about animals, reptiles, fish, and horticulture (1 Kings 4:29-34).

These passages all make sense of wisdom/*chokhmah* as special divine insight. A careful word study, however, shows that the Hebrew term wisdom/*chokhmah*, carries a much more diverse meaning than we would normally assume as divine insight. Consider its use in these passages:

- "You shall speak to all the skillful, whom I have filled with a spirit of skill (*chokhmah*), that they make Aaron's garments to consecrate him for my priesthood" (Ex. 28:3).
- "All the women whose hearts stirred them to use their skill (*chokhmah*) spun the goats' hair" (Ex. 35:26).
- "They reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits' end [literally, "and all their skill/wisdom (*chokhmah*) was thoroughly confused]" (Ps. 107:27).

We see in Biblical passages like these a fuller idea of wisdom that seems consistent with wisdom among Israel's neighbors as Old Testament scholar Gerald Sheppard noted,

At a minimum, this internationally recognized wisdom would have comprised technical skills, a general knowledge of the world, and a great facility in the use of proverbs and riddles.¹⁴

The Old Testament word wisdom/*chokhmah* carries this broad idea as it is translated variously “wisdom,” “skill,” or even “wits.”

It is interesting to go back to the wisdom/*chokhmah* of the tailoring work on Aaron’s garments mentioned in Exodus 28:3 above. This skill at sewing was one that was from God. The passage says that God filled the workers with that skill (wisdom/*chokhmah*). Solomon’s wisdom is immediately manifested in the passage as his fixing the problem of the two prostitutes each claiming the same child. This was a divine skill, not simply divine insight into the mysteries of life.

As noted earlier, in Scripture, there is a distinction between divine and earthly wisdom, but this difference is not that one is “spiritual” while the other is mundane. It is a question of whether the skill, the judgment, the insight is one that is proceeding from God and being used in his honor or whether it is proceeding from human selfishness or self-interest. In this sense, it can be said that whether answering the riddles of life or using the skills of listening (or sewing in Ex. 28:3),

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10).

In the Old Testament sense, Godly wisdom is not simply a particular insight into a deep mystery. It is living God’s purposes out in God’s strength and from God’s provisions. It includes understanding how to live, how to treat others, and how to function in the roles God has prepared.

Even for Solomon, wisdom was linked to living right before God. The Lord told Solomon that he would give Solomon a wise and discerning mind, as well as the things not asked for (riches and honor). Then there is an important add by God,

And if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days (1 Kings 3:14).

Solomon used his wisdom to effectuate justice between the two prostitutes. Solomon’s reputation for wisdom and understanding prompted a visit by the Queen of Sheba. But all the wise ideas and all the just rulings in the world could not be considered Godly wisdom absent an obedient heart.

We see wisdom as the cause behind Solomon’s diplomacy and personal interaction with King Hiram that resulted in peace between the countries:

¹⁴ Bromily, V. 4 at 1074.

And the Lord gave Solomon wisdom, as he promised him. And there was peace between Hiram and Solomon, and the two of them made a treaty (1 Kings 5:12).

Wisdom without obedience might be “knowledge,” but it is also folly. Wisdom in an obedient life is Godly wisdom. This was Solomon’s real prayer. Solomon did not really ask for “wisdom” (*chokhmah*) by name. Solomon was faced with a task from the Lord that he could not do on his own. Solomon’s prayer was, “You made me to do this, but I do not know how. Please give me what I need to do what you made me to do.” That prayer – net net – is a prayer for wisdom! “God, give me what I need to live the life you want me to lead!”

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in this lesson’s introduction, the genie in the bottle illustration often comes to my mind as I consider Solomon and wisdom. If God were to offer to grant us a desire, then I think none of us would truly say to the Almighty, “My desire is to get you to give me three more desires!” We would never be so imposing or bold.

Yet at the same time, I suspect many of us would truly like for God to give us wealth, or give us power, or give us long life, or popularity, or many other similar things. So having to choose one, and now knowing the story of Solomon, would we, in such a situation, answer God with “Please give me wisdom,” thoroughly expecting God to give us all the other things as well? In this way, would we be trying to bind God with granting us the buffet, under the guise of us asking for an a la carte item?

If we were to do so, would we ever think that the Almighty would not see through this human effort at divine manipulation? Our drive in asking for wisdom should not be to manipulate the genie in the bottle. It needs to go deeper. It needs to be a true desire to see and understand so that we may better fulfill the role God has for us on earth in furtherance of his kingdom. That is our challenge!

As we seek to understand his will for us, as we seek his power to walk in his will, then we are seeking wisdom. At that point, the wealth, the fame and honor, the popularity and security come in whatever measure is necessary for us to follow through with God’s plans. In the words of Jesus, if we seek first his kingdom *and* his righteousness, then everything else that needs to be added is added!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.”* (Mat. 12:42).

Even with all the insight and wisdom given to Solomon, his life of obedience was woefully lacking. As Solomon aged, his Godly wisdom seemed to turn into human knowledge. In every way, Jesus was wise beyond Solomon. Jesus had God’s divine insight, but even more, Jesus lived a fully obedient life, measuring up to the fullness of God’s righteous purpose, and not passing until his work was finished. Jesus was prophesied to be full of God’s Spirit of wisdom in Isaiah 11:1-3,

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

This brings us to a choice—the first in a path of wisdom: what do we do with Jesus? Where do we place him and his wisdom? Jesus came to earth with a call to fellowship. He came as a friend as well as a savior. As we talk about the difference between knowing about God and knowing God, let us make a decision to grow in intimacy with God and his wisdom. Spend daily time in study of Christ and prayer to our Father.

2. *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him”* (James 1:5).

This lesson should challenge us in our prayer life. Might I suggest we pray something similar to this, “Our Lord and Father, we ask for wisdom. Life is full of challenges and distractions. We need to know what your will and purposes are for us, and we need your strength and gifts to fulfill your calling. Help us walk in wisdom in the mundane of the everyday as well as in our drive for understanding and insight. In the name of Jesus, the wise and righteous One, Amen.

3. *“I give you a wise and discerning mind ... and if you will walk in my ways”* (1 Kings 3:12, 14).

This lesson should also challenge us in our walk. Godly wisdom should change the way we act. It is not simply a matter of getting a better grade on an exam of spiritual exercises. It is a look above for an inspired walk below!

WANT MORE?

How is your Hebrew? Next week, we anticipate adding four more letters and passing out bookmarks with the alphabet on them. This week, try to daily say the first eight letters out loud 10 times a day! “Alef, beyt, gimmel, daleth, hay, vav, zayin, chayt (remember to clear your throat when you say that one!).”

Then can you write them without looking at them?

Alef _____

Beyt _____

Gimmel _____

Daleth _____

Hey _____

Vav _____

Zayin _____

Chayt _____

Can you pick out which letter is which?

ה _____ ב _____ ד _____ ג _____

ז _____ ו _____ ח _____ א _____

ט _____ ב _____ ד _____ ו _____

א _____ ח _____ ג _____ ה _____

ז _____ ט _____ ב _____ ד _____

Email us at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com and let us know how it is going!