

Wisdom

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What is wisdom?

A much-asked question throughout world history (cf. also 1 Corinthians 1: 22). Many have wrestled with it, or have been trying to find it. For us, westerners, it often seems difficult to 'get' what wisdom is actually all about. In this brief article some old but still very actual roots of the notion of wisdom.

The meaning according the oldest Hebrew root

Fortunately, the Bible says a lot about wisdom. Before I will have a look with you at some Bible verses about wisdom, it seems useful to look at the most original Hebrew word for it as it frequently appears in the First Testament of the Bible. That word is *chokhmah* and is written in the well known Hebrew square script as: חכמה. In the old Hebrew or (West-)Semitic script (from before the time of king Solomon), consisting of a kind of pictograms (linguists call this also Canaanite or Sinaitic script), *chokhmah* is written as 𐤇𐤍𐤅𐤍𐤁𐤄.¹

Let us have a look what these old Semitic symbols tell us about the meaning of this word. Mostly it is taught that *chokhmah* is derived from 𐤇𐤍𐤅 - *chakham*, it is the 'celebrating' 𐤇 (hillul) or feminine form of it. And 𐤇𐤍𐤅 - *chakham* in old Semitic is: 𐤇𐤍𐤅𐤍. This can be read in various ways. One is: as 'the boundary 𐤍 (or borders; limit(s)) of the raised (reigning) hand(s) 𐤇' (of the plural -m 𐤇 it is not (yet) 100% clear to me whether it refers to the limit or the hand).² In other words: when we recognize the limit(s) of our own human power (our raised/reigning hand), and celebrate it, we are acting wisely.

According to this most basic meaning, wisdom in the Bible has less to do with something we (consider to) have, and much more with humility or modesty: that we are conscious of what we **do not** have! This is an important observation! Whereas worldly wisdom (Cf. Isaiah 29: 14; 1 Corinthians 1: 19) is more about life experience, knowledge and insight that we would have ourselves, wisdom in God's Kingdom is about boldly acknowledging our human boundaries and limitations.

This is in striking agreement with what a number of Bible-passages tell us about wisdom. Two of the Bible-verses about wisdom, from the First and Second Testament, are these:


When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but with the humble is wisdom.

Proverbs 11: 2

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him.

James 1: 5

We are not going to pray for wisdom, when we think to have it all in our pocket. Precisely when we realize that we do not have wisdom on our own, or that we lack it or have a deficit in it, that is to say: when we are conscious of our limits, we will ask God for it. Via James God assures us then,

¹ For more on this old script, see: André H. Roosma, '[The Written Language of Abraham, Moses and David - A study of the pictographic roots and basic notions in the underlying fabric of the earliest Biblical script](#)' , *Hallelu-YaH* Draft Working Document, 1st English version: 18 April 2011; Dutch original: January 2011; updated regularly.

² Another interpretation could be to see the veil or boundary-sign as signifying that those with raised hands of authority and blessings are distinguished or separate. And still another possible derivation assumes that a *yod* (or -older- a *wav*) has disappeared and *chakham* derives from a proto- West-Semitic form *chaikham*, of which an explanation would be: **to live** like (people) with a raised hand (priests, or rulers, who have to be wise). Note that this is about **living**; not theory but practice.

In the Bible those raised hands are connected also to innocence and purity (e.g. 1 Timothy 2: 8).

that He will give us the wisdom we need. James also lists the characteristics by which we can recognize this wisdom that God gives:

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity (hypocrisy).

James 3:17

All of this reminds me of Genesis 3. When Eve did not acknowledge the limits of her power any longer with joy from God's loving hand, it all went wrong and she acted not wise; foolish. Often the adversary uses these dynamics. In the first chapter of his letter to the Christians in Rome Paul pointed out that a lack of worship and thankfulness towards God as Creator leads to foolishness, with the consequence that people deviate from the right track into a blind alley in many regards, and ever more boundaries are crossed.

Wisdom and 'the fear of YaHUaH'

How do we become 'wise', like we talked about it above? In Proverbs we find this well known text about the basis or the beginning of wisdom:

The fear of **YaHUaH**³ is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. Proverbs 9: 10 (cf. Psalm 111: 10; Isaiah 11: 2)

And along the same lines:

The fear of **YaHUaH** is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honor.

Proverbs 15: 33

But what is this 'fear of **YaHUaH**' (mostly translated as 'the fear of the LORD')? Here too, the old Semitic script gives us a clue: *fear* is the translation of the Hebrew *yir'ah* - יִרְאָה or, according to the old Semitic signs: 𐤙𐤓𐤁𐤏 - worship the giving hand of the higher other first (this makes me think of how a dog often is focused on the hand of his master). Another explanation sees the 𐤁 - the Other One (i.e. God) as the subject, 𐤙 as the verb, such that the explanation becomes that God gives prominent joy, awe, life and/or worship. Indeed: His Person, His Character makes us stand in awe and worship Him prominently. A connotation with יִרְאָה - *ra'ah* - to see, implies that He sees. If we really look at **YaHUaH**, our God, and see Him even a bit as Who He is in His omnipresence and Love, we stand in awe, and put Him at the first place in our life. Then, we will not have trouble to acknowledge that He, as Creator, knows infinitely much more than we do, and that He, as loving heavenly Father knows better what is good for us. This leads us almost automatically to acknowledge and celebrate our own limitations, and thereby also our dependence on God **YaHUaH**.

If in the First Testament there was one person known for his wisdom, it was king Solomon (Luke 11: 31), the son of king David, who knew the fear of **YaHUaH** well (cf. Psalm 5; 15; 19). What was Solomon's wisdom all about? Precisely: again that he acknowledged that he did not possess it himself, but was humble enough to ask God for it (1 Kings 3; Proverbs 4: 7; Ecclesiastes 1: 13).

The same we observe in Paul, the 'untimely born' apostle, who spoke about it that he was strong when he was weak, and who, in the end, had more influence on church history than most other apostles. He wrote about wisdom among others:

... and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of (worldly/human) wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. 1 Corinthians 2: 4-5


And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit. 1 Corinthians 2: 13

Here, too, we see this acknowledgement of the human limitations, that allows God's power to emerge and be shown and experienced.



[to the Hallelu-YaH articles index](#)

Thanks for your interest!

³ In these studies I use this transliteration of the glorious Name of God יהוה, and not the common replacement LORD. For background info, see: André H. Roosma, 'The wonderful and lovely Name of the God Who was there, Who is there, and Who will be there' , extensive *Accede! / Hallelu-YaH* study (± 70 p.), July 2009.