



Type: Journal Article

"Wisdom" (Philosophy) in the Holy Bible

Author(s): David H. Yarn, Jr.

Source: *BYU Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1972), pp. 91–103

Published by: BYU Studies

Abstract: Assuming the author has not missed his count, the word wisdom appears 180 times in the Old Testament and 53 times in the New Testament, for a total of 233 times in the Bible. (Prima facie, this may suggest that wisdom, as reflected by the frequency of the use of that word, was of greater concern to the writers of the Old Testament than to the writers of the New Testament; but in view on the relative sizes of the two testaments in one of the author's Bibles, the word wisdom appears on the average of every 6.2 pages in the Old Testament and once every 6.4 pages in the New Testament.) By far the most frequent use of the word wisdom is in the book of Proverbs, where it appears 54 times; that is one more time than it appears in the entire New Testament. Of the books of the New Testament, wisdom appears with the greatest frequency in 1 Corinthians—18 times.



BYU Studies is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to BYU Studies and to scholarly research on the Book of Mormon and other Restoration scripture. Archived by permission of BYU Studies.

<http://byustudies.byu.edu/>

“Wisdom” (Philosophy) in the Holy Bible

David H. Yarn, Jr.

Diogenes Laertius, one of the principal sources of information about ancient philosophers, in his important work *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers*, informs us as follows concerning the origin of the word *philosophy*:

. . . Pythagoras was the first person who invented the term philosophy, and who called himself a philosopher . . . for he said that no man ought to be called wise, but only God. For formerly what is now called philosophy (φιλοσοφία) was called wisdom (σοφία), and they who professed it were called wise men (σοφοί), as being endowed with great acuteness and accuracy of mind; but now he who embraces wisdom is called a philosopher (φιλόσοφος).¹

From the quotation, we may emphasize the following: (1) What in Diogenes’s day was called philosophy was previously called wisdom. (2) Pythagoras invented the term *philosophy* (love of wisdom) and the term *philosopher* (one who loves wisdom). (3) Pythagoras invented those words because he said that no man ought to be called wise, but only God.

The primary significance of these matters to the subject of this discussion is Diogenes’s indication that philosophy had become equated with wisdom and that wisdom had been identified with God.

Through the centuries of our Western intellectual heritage, philosophy has meant different things to different people; but perhaps to the majority, if not to all, having a technical acquaintance with it, it has had two principal functions, usually *analysis* and *synthesis*. Both functions are important, although some may emphasize analysis and others synthesis, and still others a balanced relationship between the two. And there is no doubt that as a consequence of the employment of these philosophic endeavors the life values of men past and present have been scrutinized and were and are more sound (wise) than they would have otherwise been. That is, the assumption has been and still is that philosophic inquiry implies, and hopefully produces, if not wisdom, at least some reasonable and useful facsimile thereof.

Inasmuch as philosophy historically has been equated with *wisdom*, or at least presumed to have some inherent identification with wisdom, it would perhaps be appropriate and not without some benefit to examine the word wisdom as it appears in one important historical document—the Holy Bible.

Assuming the author has not missed his count, the word *wisdom* appears 180 times in the Old Testament and 53 times in the New Testament, for a total of 233 times in the Bible. (Prima facie, this may suggest that *wisdom*, as reflected by the frequency of the use of that word, was of greater concern to the writers of the Old Testament than to the writers of the New Testament; but in view on the relative sizes of the two testaments in one of the author's Bibles, the word *wisdom* appears on the average of every 6.2 pages in the Old Testament and once every 6.4 pages in the New Testament.) By far the most frequent use of the word *wisdom* is in the book of Proverbs, where it appears 54 times; that is one more time than it appears in the entire New Testament. Of the books of the New Testament, wisdom appears with the greatest frequency in 1 Corinthians—18 times. However, although the word was used many times in these two particular books, its use was not restricted to only a few writers. *Wisdom* is found in 16 books of the Old Testament and in 12 books of the New Testament.

For the student of philosophy, perhaps it is most interesting and directly relevant to attempt to determine what constitutes the full content of the meaning of the word *wisdom* from its use in the Bible. According to the author's colleague, Professor Keith Meservy, what is essentially the word *wisdom* translates from the Old Testament Hebrew word *khokhmah* (חִכְמָה). More familiar is the *sophia* (σοφία) from the Greek, commonly used in the New Testament, which, of course, is one of the root words of *philosophia* or our English word *philosophy*. Inasmuch as the words *khokhmah* and *sophia*, from the Old and New Testaments, respectively, each essentially mean what the English word *wisdom* means, it is necessary, in order to determine the specific content of the meaning of those words, to examine the contexts in which they occur in order to discover either explicit meanings or meanings by associations.

This examination of what may be called the "wisdom passages" of the Bible will suggest five classifications, or categories, for identifying the contents of *wisdom* as it is defined or described in the Bible. That is, *wisdom* in the Bible denotes: (1) craft skills, (2) fine arts skills and knowledge of animate nature, (3) instruction in morals, (4) knowledge of God, and (5) righteousness.

Craft skills. Two of the passages which illustrate this dimension of the content of wisdom are found on the books of Exodus and 1 Kings.

Them hath he filled with wisdom of heart, to work all manner of work, of the engraver, and of the cunning workman, and of the embroiderer, in blue, and in purple, in scarlet, and in fine linen, and of the weaver, even of them that do any work, and of those that device cunning work. (Exodus 35:35.)

He was a widow's son of the tribe Naphtali, and his father was a man of Tyre, a worker in brass: and he was filled with wisdom, and understanding,

and cunning to work all works in brass. And he came to king Solomon, and wrought all his work. (1 Kings 7:14.)

These passages identify *wisdom* as the ability “to work all manner of work” and mention the following specific skills: engraving, embroidering (in blue, in purple, in scarlet, and in fine linen), weaving, and “cunning to work all works in brass.”

Fine arts skills and knowledge of animate nature. A passage in the book of 1 Kings describing King Solomon’s great wisdom best illustrates these aspects of wisdom:

And he spake three thousand proverbs: and his songs were a thousand and five.

And he spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall: he spake also of beasts, and of fowl, and of creeping things, and of fishes. (1 Kings 4:32–33.)

Solomon’s wisdom in these matters is described as having “excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt.” (1 Kings 4:30.)

Instruction in morals. Three rather typical passages which identify wisdom with instruction in morals are found in the book of Proverbs:

To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding;
To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity;
To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion [advisement].

A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels. (Proverbs 1:2–5.)

He that refuseth instruction [correction] despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth [obeyeth] reproof getteth understanding [possesseth a heart].

The fear of the Lord is the instruction of wisdom; and before honour is humility. (Proverbs 15:32–33.)

The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame. (Proverbs 29:15.)

In these verses, we find wisdom associated with justice, judgment, equity, knowledge, discretion, understanding, and receiving reproof. In general, we are told that receiving instruction on these things makes one wise, whereas, refusing it is a contradiction of basic human propensity and need.

Knowledge of God. Some of the most stirring passages in the Bible which explicate the content of the word wisdom as used in that holy book identify wisdom as or with knowledge of God:

So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding;

Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding;

If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures;

Then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.

For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.

He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous: he is a buckler to them that walk uprightly. (Proverbs 2:2–7.)

This passage reminds one of the wonderful exhortation of the Lord when he bade his followers to hunger and thirst after righteousness and promised that if they would do so they would be filled with the Holy Ghost. (3 Nephi 12:6; Matthew 5:6.) Notice again the essence of the passage in Proverbs: If you incline the ear, apply the heart, cry after, lift up voice for, seek, search, you will “find the knowledge of God. For the Lord giveth wisdom. . . .”

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10.)

In whom [the Father and the Christ] are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:3)

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. (James 1:5.)

This last verse should be of particular interest to the Latter-day Saints student of philosophy, inasmuch as it was the study of this verse by the young boy and future prophet, Joseph Smith, which ignited his faith and provided the final motivation to seclude himself in what we now call the Sacred Grove where he received what we reverently identify as the First Vision. Note that this verse, which is vitally related to the opening of the last dispensation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is an invitation to man to seek wisdom; and, in response to Joseph Smith’s having sought wisdom, he received that magnificent vision in which he saw the Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ the Redeemer as two distinct personages, gaining fundamental knowledge of God which had previously been lost to the world.

For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom;

But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness;

But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. (1 Corinthians 1:22–24.)

But of him (God) are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption. . . . (1 Corinthians 1:30.)

In these verses, the Apostle Paul characterizes the Christ as that wisdom which men should seek for, a provision from God, which may work a discomfort upon the unconverted.

Righteousness. Perhaps there are more “wisdom passages” whose context suggests that real wisdom for man has to do with his loving a righteous life than any others. Some typical illustrations of righteousness as the meaning of the word wisdom are found in the following scriptures:

Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the Lord my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it.

Keep therefore and go do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. (Deuteronomy 4:5–6.)

And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding. (Job 28:28.)

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever. (Psalm 111:10.)

When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom.

The integrity of the upright shall guide them: but the perverseness of transgressors shall destroy them. (Proverbs 11:2–3.)

She [the virtuous woman] openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. (Proverbs 31:26.)

Here, then, we see wisdom identified with the lowly, with humility, with departing from evil, with the integrity of the upright, with the kindness of the virtuous woman, and with a good understanding, which is a product of keeping the commandments. Summarily, we are told to keep and do the statutes and judgments of God, “for this is your wisdom . . .”

Thus, as we consider the uses of the word *wisdom* as it appears in the Old and New Testaments, we discover that, although there are a few instances where the word represents the skills of various crafts, literary skills, and knowledge of objects in nature, predominantly it is associated with instruction in morals, knowing God (explicitly Jesus Christ), and righteousness of life.

In view of these contents attributed to wisdom, it is understandable why it is valued so highly and received the praise found in many passages, such as the following:

Wisdom is better than weapons of war . . . (Ecclesiastes 9:18.)

Wisdom is better than strength . . . (Ecclesiastes 9:16.)

Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. (Ecclesiastes 2:13.)

My son, eat thou honey, because it is good; and the honeycomb, which is sweet to thy taste:

So shall the knowledge of wisdom be unto thy soul: when thou hast found it, then there shall be a reward, and thy expectation shall not be cut off. (Proverbs 24:13–14.)

No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls: for the price of wisdom is above rubies. (Job 28:18.)

Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. (Proverbs 4:7.)

For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain therefore than fine gold.

She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. (Proverbs 3:14–15.)

In these passages, as in others previously cited, we not only discover the high value placed upon wisdom but also observe the frequent occurrence of the words *knowledge* and *understanding* in context with the word *wisdom*. A similar passage is Exodus 35:31, in which we find: “And he hath filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship. . . .” It might be suggested that in all passages of this kind the closely allied intentions of the words are obvious; and some interpreters may even think of such passages as manifesting essentially nothing more than a literary parallelism. However, there are some passages where the verbs used in conjunction with these nouns suggest distinctions. For example:

The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens.

By his knowledge the depths are broken up, and clouds drop down the dew. (Proverbs 3:19–20.)

Wisdom and *understanding* both seem to be used in the sense of judgment and decision, having to do more with what we may think of as *intelligence* or a directing kind of force or influence; whereas, *knowledge* seems to be used to suggest the instrumental function or active agent.

Another interesting passage which illustrates this principle of distinction, perhaps containing even an implicit principle of gradation (at least it is certainly subject to such interpretation) is found in Jeremiah 10:12:

He hath made the earth by his power, he hath established the world by his wisdom, and hath stretched out the heavens by his discretion. (See also Jeremiah 51:15.)

In Jeremiah 51:15, the word *understanding* is used instead of *discretion*.

“Established the world by his wisdom” may be construed to suggest that the reason for the world’s being organized lies in God’s wisdom; “stretched out the heavens by his discretion” or “understanding” may be conceived to suggest the plan or pattern of arrangement of things; and, finally, “made the earth by his power” seems to specify the active force in bringing things into that arrangement. So, although *wisdom*, *knowledge*, and *understanding* are often used in conjunction with each other, at times almost as synonyms, or in parallel form to at least suggest different facets of a given thing, on occasion they suggest functionally different aspects of God and of man.

Another dimension of the examination of wisdom in the scriptures may be called the distinction or contrast between earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom. A very familiar prophecy having to do with the restoration of the gospel which contrasts the work of God with the wisdom of men is found in Isaiah:

Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, even a marvelous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid. (Isaiah 29:14.)

Isaiah thrusts a profound and forceful warning to man to avoid selfishness and overconfidence in his own wisdom and knowledge:

For thou hast trusted in thy Wickedness: thou hast said, None seeth me. Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath perverted thee; and thou hast said in thine heart, I am, and none else beside me. (Isaiah 47:10.)

This is an insightful example of the concept that stubborn concern for self only—“None seeth me,” “I am, and none else beside me”—is a perversion and that human wisdom and human knowledge alone do not give one sufficient perspective—“Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath perverted thee.”

Another interesting warning to man regarding his wisdom is found in the word of the Lord through his prophet Ezekiel in the form of a lamentation for the King of Tyre. After reminding the king of his former righteousness, wisdom, beauty, and wealth, and a recounting of certain matters, the Lord said:

Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness [RSV: splendor]: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may hold thee. (Ezekiel 28:17.)

This verse suggest that the root problem for the king of Tyre was his pride, that he was lifted up because of his beauty. The part of the verse which is more relevant to the present discussion is that in which the Lord says, “Thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness [RSV: splendor]:” Not only the Authorized Version, but also the Inspired Version and the Jewish Publication Society of America’s translation use the word *brightness*; but *splendor* is used in the Revised Standard Version, the Confraternity Version, and the Jerusalem Bible. The underlying concept of either *brightness* or *splendor* is “shining” or “illumination,” and the Lord said the king’s wisdom had been corrupted by his brightness or shining or illumination. In considering the warning implicit in this lamentation to the king of Tyre, we recall another individual, even more powerful, whose brilliance was not enough to save him, whose very name means “light-bringing” or “light-bearer.” His name is Lucifer.

The Lord warns men against overconfidence in human wisdom, and contrast what we may call earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom in the New Testament as well:

For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21.)

Perhaps the translation in the New English Bible is even more clear. It reads:

As God in his wisdom ordained, the world failed to find him by its wisdom, and he chose to save those who have faith by the folly of the Gospel. (1 Corinthians 1:21.)

The Apostle Paul makes the distinction more emphatically in 1 Corinthians, where he says:

And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power:

That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:4–5.)

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.

Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:12–14.)

Minimally, there the three things here which must be reiterated: first, Paul’s contrast between the enticing words of man’s wisdom and the

demonstration of the Spirit and power of God; second, man’s faith should not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God; and, third, the natural man, who knows only the wisdom of men, cannot know the things of God because they can only be discerned spiritually.

The Apostle James also distinguishes heavenly from earthly wisdom; but his focus is quite different from that of the Apostle Paul—although in no way contradictory. In James we read:

Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? Let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality [wrangling], and without hypocrisy.

And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace. (James 3:13–18.)

In this passage from James not only do we find him distinguishing earthly wisdom from heavenly wisdom as such but also introducing another facet of wisdom which we have not considered previously, namely, the product or fruit of wisdom. The following passages suggest some of the products of wisdom:

Say unto wisdom, Thou art my sister, and call understanding thy kinswoman:

That they may keep thee from the strange woman, from the stranger which flattereth with her words. (Proverbs 7:4–5.)

Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. (Proverbs 3:13.)

Her [wisdom’s] ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.

She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her. (Proverbs 3:17–18.)

. . . keep sound wisdom and discretion:

Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble.

When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet.

Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh.

For the Lord shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken. (Proverbs 3:21, 23–26.)

Ecclesiastes, the Preacher, author of perhaps the most pessimistic book in the Bible and perhaps in all scripture, mentions what might be regarded as a negative note to the products or fruits of wisdom:

For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1:18.)

However, the Preacher later states:

For wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence: but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it. (Ecclesiastes 7:12.)

Or as is rendered in the Revised Standard Version:

For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money; and the advantage of knowledge is the wisdom that preserves the life of him who has it.

The products of wisdom are further described in these passages:

My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion:

So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. (Proverbs 3:21–22.)

For whoso findeth me [wisdom] findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord.

But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death. (Proverbs 8:35–36.)

Exalt her [wisdom], and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honour, when thou dost embrace her.

She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee. (Proverbs 4:8–9.)

Thus, the fruits of wisdom include protection from the flattering words which would draw one into immorality; happiness, ways of pleasantness, paths of peace, freedom from fear, sleep that is sweet, confidence from the Lord; are a tree of life and life unto the soul; and include possibly, the most far-reaching promise of all, though some interpreters may regard it as strictly poetic or metaphorical, which is consistent with the promises of the Lord in other revelations regarding exaltation: wisdom “shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee.” (Proverbs 4:9.)

Beginning with the etymological fact that *philosophy* means love of wisdom and that *philosopher* means one who loves wisdom, and the teaching of Diogenes Laertius that Pythagoras coined them because “no man ought to be called wise, but only God,” we have examined the word *wisdom* as it is used in the Holy Bible.

The word appears with almost identical frequency in the two testaments and in slightly less than half of the books of each. There is a limited use of the word to denote skill in various crafts and skill in literary arts and knowledge of the natural world. Predominantly, *wisdom* denotes instruction in morals, knowledge of God (specifically Jesus Christ), and righteousness of life. Consistent with this meaning, we are told that wisdom is of greater value than silver or fine gold, more precious than rubies, and that all things that can be desired are not to be compared to it. (Proverbs 3:14–15.)

Heavenly (God’s) wisdom is distinguished from earthly (man’s) wisdom, and men are warned against trusting in their own wisdom and knowledge. Finally, the higher wisdom, that which can be known only through the Spirit and power of God, is “peaceable, gentle, easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality (wrangling), and without hypocrisy” (James 3:17–18); and gives happiness, peace, freedom from fear, sleep that is sweet, and is life unto the soul.

Dr. Yarn, professor of philosophy and former dean of the College of Religious Instruction at Brigham Young University, has published widely in Church and scholarly publications. One of his latest publications is “Peace—Whither?” in *To the Glory of God: Mormon Essays on Great Issues* (Deseret Book, 1972).

1. Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (C. D. Yonge, trans.), pp. 9–10. London: George Bell & Sons, 1891.