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Hokma – wisdom in the sapiential books of the Old Testament

PH.D. Thesis

-Abstract-

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KEY WORDS:

Hokma, Sophia, Wisdom, Solomon, Sapiential Literature, Personification of Wisdom.

The title of the thesis suggests an approach that covers historical and exegetic segments, with preponderance in the sapiential books of the Old Testament. To talk about the concept of „wisdom” in „sapiential books” signifies approaching the subject that gave the name to this sort of literature.

The aim of the sapiential literature is that of sharing the wisdom in its different aspects, as a constant and always present preoccupation of the human spirit was to look for a sensible life. The premises for our journey in studying the wisdom in the sapiential books of the Old Testament is, that through it, precious pieces of advice and moral norms were transmitted under the form of exceptional stylistic outcomes. All the sapiential literature is part of a process of assimilation and transfer from the Egyptian wisdom to the Hebrew wisdom, and implicitly the Greek one. The sapiential literature starts in Mesopotamia and Egypt (cc. 2700-2000 B.C.) in the form of maxims and proverbs that focus on life rules, and then it is crystallized amidst two people, the Hebrews and the Greeks. Even if sapiential literature is a little different in its forms and themes from the rest of the Hebrew writings, it becomes a meeting point between the Egyptian sapiential literature, the Hebrew sapiential literature and the Greek sapiential literature, their common point being the sharing of wisdom.

In our thesis we intend to analyze the concept of wisdom starting with the oriental civilization, the Greek ancient philosophy and from the Holy Scripture with the sapiential books in all its three aspects, the human wisdom, the personified wisdom and the wisdom as a God’s attribute.

The hypostasis of the personified *hokma* underlined a scholastic division of wisdom in the theoretical and practical wisdom. Throughout this thesis our wish was to surpass this

division, we did not wish to combat the personification, but to use what means in subsidiary the idea of person, as in person there is not a practical part and a theoretical part.

Even though it does not represent the whole of the sapiential books, the canonic book *The Book of Proverbs* and the other non-canonical books, *The Wisdom of Solomon* and *The Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach*, together they sum up an approach of wisdom in its dynamic and practical dimension, and as a particularity they concern a unique phenomenon, the personification of wisdom. The personification of wisdom is among the most original creations of that period and includes a confrontation of opinions between Judaism and Hellenism. In the case of the personified wisdom our intention was to restrict the arguments that debate its identity, therefore there was no need to bring all the aspects of wisdom to a univocal notion or to an identical figure.

From the methodological point of view, without the pretense of being exhaustive, we used as study methods the diachronic method¹, the historical-critical method and in the case of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian sapiential literature in relation with the Hebraic one we used the comparative method. Some of the texts studied required a thorough attention in terms of their content, thus, we preferred an exegetic approach.

The thesis is structured in three big parts preceded by a methodological section that contains terminological and semantic references as well as the reflection of the theme in the published researches „status quaestionis”².

To encode wisdom as a key concept in our research, our starting point was to define the word known in the laic acceptance and in the biblical literature. Regardless of the forms that wisdom take, חכמה, σοφία, sapientia, this represents in most of the cases the practical wisdom that people possess, naturally, or being instilled by God. In many cases, *hokma* is strictly referring to God's wisdom.

The reflection of the theme in the published literature as well as the marking of certain special aspects and the systematization of the theme approaches, contributed to offering us a starting point in trying to solve the development of the wisdom concept.

Until the beginning of the 20th century, we noticed a certain reserve from the part of the researchers concerning the study of the sapiential literature, especially in the non-canonical literature. This reticence can probably be traced in the fact that there were textual similarities

¹ The diachronic reading is oriented towards the context where the Biblical texts appeared and especially towards the authors of the Biblical texts. The diachronic exegesis responds to the questions of historical-critic nature.

² Expression rooted in Latin that refers to the stage of the research. It is frequently used in the published literature to refer summarily to the results accumulated on a certain subject and the areas left out to be developed.

with the sapiential literature of the neighbors, thus indicating that it is in fact a foreign body to the Hebrew literature. The fact that some books were considered non-canonical weighted quite heavily in the decision of not conferring them the due importance. Another reason was the researchers inability to integrate the sapiential literature in the Semitic theological system, a fact that contributed to the marginalization of this literature for a long period of time. Regardless of our perspective on things, until the 20th century, these writings that treat wisdom were neglected, however, when they were rediscovered by the modern researchers, the study area grew, by treating subjects such as personification and the analogy of wisdom – *Logos*.

In the Romanian theology, the studies that concern the theme of wisdom can be divided into three large categories, as it follows: the first category is of general interest, where sapiential books are studied as well as their background and the present thematic influences from the Egyptian, Assyro-Babylonian sapiential writings. The second category is that where the theologians wrote about wisdom, treating it in an allegorical manner, using the patristic exegesis to the text of the Septuagint, by identifying in it the person of Jesus Christ, discovered non entirely at the level of the Old Testament, a discovery that comes as a preparation for the embodiment of the Word, in the New Testament. And finally the third category is that where the researchers contoured in large strokes the development of the sapiential literature and the word of wisdom, a course that starts from the practical wisdom and ends in the Greek philosophy that will make a mark on the word.

The first part of this research wants to contour a portrait of King Solomon and to identify the wisdom of Solomon, in the context of the oriental wisdom, such as it appears in the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Assyro-Babylonian, Sumero-Akkadian or Syrophoenician writings, including their connection with the Greek philosophy, which appears as a transitory stage between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Wisdom and the royal court are strongly bound together in the ancient world. In fact, Wisdom is found only at the royal courts. Of course there was a tradition of the popular wisdom that was found among the people. But even those from the crowds had to have connections with the king and its court³.

It is obvious that when we speak about wisdom, the emblematic figure and its transposition is in the person of King Solomon, the wisest and the cleverest king in the Semitic tradition. Prominent character of the Semitic history and implicitly of the Old

³ Ronald E. Clements, *Wisdom for a Changing World* (California: BIBAL PRESS Berkeley, 1990), 59.

Testament, Solomon⁴ had a renowned and prosperous reign remaining in the conscience of the Hebrew people as being the person that received from God a brilliant mind, as nobody did before him. Solomon can be considered the prototype of the divine and human wisdom in the Old Testament. Gerhard von Rad believed that there was a „Solomonic enlightenment in the sense of the flourishing of the intellectual creation that «liberates» itself from the patriarchal and ancient code. Indeed, the Wisdom of Solomon is mentioned in a special manner, together with its deeds, in the references for the book on Solomon’s accomplishments. It is very likely that the Wisdom of Solomon represented the spirit of its epoch”⁵.

The portrait of King Solomon was crayoned having as a first source the masoretic text, with insertions, where the case presents itself, from the Septuagint, the rabbinic literature and historical data as well as archaeological data. The figure of Solomon in the sapiential literature is characterized by the reputation of a great wise man, enforced by biblical exemplifications of several happenings: the moment when the king asks for wisdom from God (III Kings, 3, 5-14), the moment when the gift of wisdom that he received in the case of the two women is illustrated (III Kings 3, 16-28), the meeting with the Queen of Sheba (III Kings 10, 1-10) and the fact that an amazing number of proverbs and chants are told by him (III Kings 4, 32).

Concerning the sapiential literature we have to take into consideration its primal forms, and these are surely not identified but very slightly in the Hebrew culture. As each development is influenced by the environment, in the same way the Hebrew literature is influenced by the neighboring people and most of all when we talk about the most ancient civilizations, the Mesopotamian and the Egyptian civilizations. We can state that the origin of the Mesopotamian sapiential literature can be traced in the Sumerian Renaissance period, at the end of the 3rd millennium B.C. A mature civilization was creating the perfect ambient for the development of a sapiential literature, having the capacity of formulating objective and real objectives on the values of life and on historical values⁶.

In Mesopotamia, we can identify a correspondent for the Hebrew word חָכָם, but we identify some adjectives for wise (*enqu*, *mūdû*, *hassu*, *etpēšu*)⁷. Simple people from Mesopotamia understood wisdom as being strongly connected to professional skills, which is

⁴ 960 B.Ch. Solomon succeeds to David as the king of the chosen people, and in 950 Solomon builds the first temple in Jerusalem, cf. S. Karesh, M. Hurvitz, *Encyclopedia of Judaism* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2006), 23.

⁵ David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. VI (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 111.

⁶ Giorgio Castellino, “Sapienza Babilonese,” in *Sapienza di Israele e Vicino Oriente Antico*, Laila Lucci (Milano: Edizioni Terra Santa, 2015), 71.

⁷ Georg Fohrer, “Sophia,” in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. J. L. Crenshaw (New York KTAV, 1976), 477.

why the „wise designation” could express a craftsperson in a general sense, indifferent to the domain of activity. Whether it was a trader, an architect, a constructor, a soldier, a civil servant, a fortune-teller, an exorcist, a musician, a doctor, a scribe, a counselor or professor, the craftsperson was called a wise man⁸.

In Sumer, the word used to express wisdom was *nam-kù-zu*, this word can be translated as „pure knowledge”⁹. the Sumero-Akkadian tradition creates and develops, as well, the mythical concept of wise man (*apkallu*), concept that refers to wise men from the prediluvian period, that brought civilization and culture to the inhabitants of Sumer. From all the Semitic languages, the Akkadian culture develops the richest terminology for the semantic field of wisdom. Close to the meaning of the Hebraic word *hokma* there is the static verb¹⁰ *emēnqu* „to be wise”, from which other related forms will develop. The adjective *emqu*, in a general sense is used with valences of “wise, skillful” and in particular as a superior knowledge, when it refers to gods, kings, old men and scribes. One of the counsels makes reference to an ethical ideal. In an excerpt, the abstract noun *nemēnqu* is used with the meaning of „women’s archness” and in another excerpt as „wisdom of men or gods”¹¹.

From a literally point of view, we can talk about personification even from the Sumerian and Babylonian period, where gods are presented as personified aspects of nature. In the same way, the structure of Mesopotamian prayers remind of the prayers in the Psalms and the non-canonical literature, following similar steps of poetic construction: invoking the divinity followed by a request and the expression of a feeling of abandonment from the part of the divinity.

The Egyptian sapiential literature completes this general picture of the developing of the sapiential literature and brings new completions. It is formed of maxims, proverbs, advice, in general coming from a person of high rank or from a father towards his son, in order to help the reader to integrate in the society. The line that the Egyptian sapiential literature follows is that of a practical wisdom, tracing directions where men have to fall within in order to succeed in life. There is also a distinction made very clear between the wise men and the average educated man. From the point of view of literary characteristics, we identified in the Egyptian texts the member parallelism, encountering for the first time the antithetic

⁸ Ronald F. G. Sweet, “The Sage in Akkadian Literature: a Philological Study,” in *The Sage in Israel and The Ancient Near East*, ed. John Gammie, Leo Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 57.

⁹ Paul Alain Beaulieu, “The Social and Intellectual Setting of Babylonian Wisdom Literature,” in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*, ed. Clifford Richard (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 3.

¹⁰ The static verbs indicate states, sensations, things that do not represent actions.

¹¹ Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary or the Old Testament*, Vol. IV (Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 367.

parallelism, where the second verse explains in other words the main verse, and the synthetic parallelism, where the second verse develops the main idea of the first verse.

Among the most well-known concepts from the Greek literature and philosophy there is the word of *sophia* – „wisdom”. The Greek sapiential literature sums up a series of proverbs („παροιμιαί”), maxims („γνῶμαι”), anecdotes („χρεία”) and apothegms („ἀποφθέγματα”)¹².

The approached sapiential literature revealed the fact that there is a sameness of vocabulary and that there are the same words, expressions or phrases that are used. The literary structures or creations have the same form: maxims or proverbs. The objective is also the same, “learning the wisdom”, and this wisdom is typical to families and to households. That is why we can state that the Hebrew sapiential literature, even if similar to other texts, might have distinct and substantial differences of beliefs.

The second part aimed to study the sapiential writings of the Old Testament, in the context of the didactic-poetic literature from the Holy Scripture and their relation with *Torah*. Our objectives were to outline the characteristics of the Hebrew poetry and of the literary forms that express wisdom, with terminological and stylistic particularities.

In this part we substantiated our research in the canonical book *The Book of Proverbs* and the two non-canonical books *The Wisdom of Solomon* and *The Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach*, as these books, expression of the sapiential genre, reflect in the most eloquent manner the word of wisdom under different aspects, *hokma* or *sophia*. Another reason for their choice was the stylistic plus that they confer to other books from the testament, namely, the stylistic procedure of personification. In our research it is clear that an important part of the thesis studies the aspect of the personified wisdom.

The anxieties and the introspections of humanity of that period were transmitted by instructions that took the form of the characteristics of some literary genres of the oriental sapiential literature. As regarding the stylistic form of wisdom as rendered in the poetic-didactic books, the mostly used one is *masal* – parable, proverb, sentence, maxim that comprises thinking that raised from the divine wisdom and the practical advice for everyday life, having as the main goal the learning of wisdom¹³. The proverbs are organized in a compositional manner in literary species that comprise the maxim, the enigma, the fable, the eulogy and the dialogue. These literary species operate with metaphoric transfers.

In Biblical exegesis there is the general opinion that the image of wisdom is a poetic personification. Personification is a minor genre of metaphor and is formed of an interaction

¹² Usually the apothegms were formulated by a famous personality from the Ancient World.

¹³ Nicolae Neaga, “Poezia Vechiului Testament,” *MA* nr. 3-4 (1960): 183-201.

between „source” and „objective, plan, purpose”. The purpose is the auto personification of wisdom, and the source cannot be easily identified¹⁴.

In this second part we also identified and analyzed the pericopes from the sapiential literature where wisdom is personified. The first discourse of wisdom is identified in the first chapter of the Book of Proverbs, verses 20-33 and the second discourse in the 8th chapter. We definitely can identify in the Book of Proverbs other places where wisdom is involved in a dialogue or it is personified. Besides the two famous discourses we identify in the 3rd chapter, verses 13-20 the eulogy of wisdom and in chapter 9, 1-18, the banquet organized by wisdom containing similar elements.

In the first didactic poem 20-33, named also the appeal of the wisdom, wisdom is presented as an attribute of divinity, as well as a virtue that can be embraced and possessed by wise men. In the 8th chapter, wisdom is described as an interested figure, as a personification of a mental power that declares that it would have preceded the creation and would have a relation of father-daughter with God. It transcends the mundane reality and the human minds, individual or collective, being active in the highest spheres of human existence. This figure does not represent only a conceptualization of common human wisdom, but in a certain way it identifies itself with it and becomes its source¹⁵. Concerning the enigma of the banquet from the 9th chapter, wisdom is presented as a noble host that prepared the banquet, thus it builds a house, sacrifices cattle, prepares the wine and lays the table. Chapter 9 is composed as an invitation but, in general, the invitation is followed by an answer, an answer that does not exist in this chapter. By the stylistic method of personification wisdom is seen as a person of feminine gender and the unwise women are seen in antithesis. Both act according to the same pattern, they use the same location to a lunch the invitation and both have things to offer, but the transmitting way is different thus the result as well. The personified wisdom from the proverbs is a figure through which human wisdom, divinity cognition and God’s will are transmitted from generation to generation¹⁶.

In *The Wisdom of Solomon*, wisdom plays a more important role than in the *Proverbs* and *The Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach*. The personified wisdom is identified with the power that lies behind the throne, those who would honor the wisdom will reign forever (6, 20-21); it is wisdom that rules and guides the kings (*Proverbs* 8, 15-16). Wisdom is present even from the beginning of creation (*The Wisdom of Solomon* 6, 22), at the creation of the world (9, 9),

¹⁴ Gerlinde Baumann, “Personified Wisdom: Context, Meanings, Theology,” in *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, ed. Maier Christi, Nuria Calduch Benages (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 58.

¹⁵ Michael V. Fox, “Ideas of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9,” *JBL*, vol 116 (1997): 624.

¹⁶ Baumann, “Personified Wisdom,” 63.

knowing all that relates to creation as it is the contributor to all things (7, 21). Thus, the personified wisdom appears as a co-creator of God. In chapter 9, verse 4, it is described as standing by the God's throne; here *The Wisdom of Solomon* makes a step forward in comparison with the books of the Proverbs and of Sirach. We also identify texts where the personified wisdom is subordinated to God who leads it (7, 15)¹⁷. More than that, it is presented as the bride of Solomon, who determines him to rule in a righteous and wise manner. Then, it develops in a synonymic parallelism with the Word of God, and even, in certain passages, it seems to be presented as identical to God's Spirit. Only in this writing one eventually can speak of a transition from personification to personalization. In other words, the attribute becomes person. Wisdom becomes a manifestation of God in front of men, as a sort of hypostasis of divine attributes. In *The Wisdom of Solomon* one does not speak necessarily of a literary artifice as regarding wisdom but of an efficient manner to present God's actions and His presence in people's life and in the creation of the world.

The book *The Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach*, chapter 24 constitutes a discourse of wisdom inspired from chapter 8, Proverbs, though there are some notable differences, the speech of wisdom takes place in a liturgical gathering (v. 1-2), but the speech of wisdom in the Proverbs is placed as shown, in the streets, at the town's gates, in squares. The idea of the poem from Sirach 24 can be expressed as follows: wisdom lives with God, people do not have access to it; nevertheless God pours it forth on the whole creation and makes it accessible to all people as a gift of the agreement made with the Jewish people. The stylistic method used in this case is that of personification, the wisdom personified from Sirach, though it appears as an independent figure with a great authority, is subordinated to God. Wisdom as God's creation is not God, but it is the representative of God on earth.

Perhaps the most attractive definition of the personified wisdom is given by Gerard Von Rad „auto revelation in creation”¹⁸ or „the divine principle of the world” which corresponds to the world's secret on one hand, and on the other, it corresponds to the divine call launched towards people¹⁹.

The wisdom of the Old Testament was identified with the Law, the Torah, between the two words there is an approach as both have a divine source and are a gift received by the Jewish people from God. In the tradition of the Jewish people, the voice of God is transmitted through the voice of the prophets, afterwards being the prophets' writings that constituted the

¹⁷ Baumann, “Personified Wisdom,” 71.

¹⁸ Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, ed. James D. Martin (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1972), 144-176.

¹⁹ Gerhard Von Rad, *Gottes Wirken in Israel* (Neukirchen: O.H. Steck, 1974), 130.

Law. These writings are identified with wisdom as they represent God's will transmitted to the people. The Torah remains the place where we can meet the God of Israel. Thus, the Wisdom/ Torah is the power of God that stands among people, being „the theology of presence” of Yahweh in the Law²⁰.

The third part of the thesis, proposes a literary – exegetic part that imposes several steps: we suggested a personal translation of the prayer from *The Wisdom of Solomon*, chapter 9, this translation takes into account the latest researches and the Romanian vocabulary; then we analyzed the structures for this prayer, suggested until now; we approached this prayer from the literary point of view, by a morphologic and syntactic analysis, exegetic conclusions; we also introduced a theological approach that, aside the text explanation, goes on two comparative levels: the wisdom of Solomon and the wisdom of men, the wisdom of people and the Wisdom of God; and at the end of the chapter we presented the specificity of the prayers in the non-canonical books that include the Solomon's prayer.

In our exegesis we used a strophic literary structure of the prayer, and in parallel, we pointed out elements of concentric structure in order to identify the parallelism and the progress of the ideas. In doing this, we benefited of a punctuation of key elements that brought us to a more profound analysis and understanding of the text, as well as of the theological teachings.

The figure of King Solomon and the wisdom of people contoured in *The Wisdom of Solomon* can be presented under the form of some synthesis ideas. Solomon presents himself as an ordinary man, at all levels, even from birth; he mentions his mortal origins, fact that justifies the choice of wisdom as a goal of his life. As any mortal...once born he breathed the common air and he was raised as any other king, as entering and leaving this world are identical for all. The figure of Solomon presented in *The Wisdom of Solomon* benefited from a practical wisdom, φρόνησις, as all people do, a skill to which other gifts of wisdom will be added through prayers. Regarding the Wisdom of God and the wisdom of men, the wisdom that comes from God is supreme and that of men is limited and frail. The native wisdom of man is transient, as man is incapable to perceive the laws and the judgment of the supreme being and, even if there were be a perfect man, without the Wisdom that comes from God he would remain limited in his knowledge.

Concerning the specific of prayers from the non-canonical books we used a classification on three levels: the purpose of prayers, the means to call attention from God and

²⁰ Lucci, *Sapieza di Israele*, 141.

the response to these prayers. The most representative prayers from the non-canonical books are those for obtaining wisdom and make reference to obtaining the moral wisdom by the person that prays. These prayers have as a starting base for the structure as well as for the themes, the prayer from III Kings recorded in the 3rd chapter, verses 6-14.

The last part covered the possibility of a Christological link between the texts we studied and passages from the New Testament, we responded to the questions whether wisdom belongs to the Trinity, whether the personification of wisdom is a stylistic literary process, whether wisdom can be regarded as hypostasis, person, or whether we must portray wisdom only as a divine attribute of God.

The thesis closes with a chapter dedicated to general conclusions where we will strengthen the idea that the knowledge about wisdom develops along with history, starting from the oriental civilization, the Greek antic philosophy and in the Holy Scripture mostly, in the sapiential books, under three aspects: human wisdom, personified wisdom and wisdom regarded as one of God's attributes.

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IX. COURSES ON THE THEME

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• AVILA, Marco, *Cartea Proverbelor și Înțelepciunea Gnostică*, curs susținut în anul universitar 2010-2011, în cadrul Facultății de Științe Biblice și Arheologie „Ecole Biblique” Ierusalim, Israel.

• BISSOLI, Giovanni, *Introducere în literatura apocrifă a Vechiului Testament*, curs susținut în anul universitar 2010-2011, în cadrul Facultății de Științe Biblice și Arheologie „Studium Biblicum Franciscanum” Ierusalim, Israel.

• CHIALÀ, Sabino, *Ermineutica și Istoria Exegezei*, curs susținut în anul universitar 2010-2011, în cadrul Facultății de Științe Biblice și Arheologie „Studium Biblicum Franciscanum” Ierusalim, Israel.

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X. SEMINARS ON THE THEME

• AVILA, Marco, *Personificarea Înțelepciunii în Vechiul Testament*, seminar susținut în anul universitar 2010-2011, în cadrul Facultății de Științe Biblice și Arheologie „Studium Biblicum Franciscanum” Ierusalim, Israel.

XI. SITOGRAPHY

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