



Postgraduate Conference

KING'S
College
LONDON

Reframing Wisdom Literature

Problematising Literary and Religious Interactions in Ancient Wisdom Texts

Department of Classics, King's College London, 30th-31st May 2019

Lecture Theatre 2 (BH(S)4.04), Bush House (access: North entrance, from Kingsway), London

Keynote speaker: Prof Dimitri Gutas, Yale University

Introduction

The label 'wisdom literature' has been a focus of contemporary scholarly debate centring on issues of categorisation and definition. In particular, its application to Mesopotamian texts has recently been problematised (cf. Lambert 1996: 1-2; scholarship overview in Cohen 2013: 8-12). This conference will explore whether and how similar questioning should lead us to rethink the traditional and deep-seated applications of this label to the so-called 'wisdom books' of the Hebrew Bible (*Proverbs*, *Job* and *Ecclesiastes*) and to Greek texts (such as Hesiod, Theognis and Phocylides). Another problem deserving consideration is the juxtaposing of other labels such as 'advice' and 'didactic literature' to the tag 'wisdom literature'. This eventually takes us to the central issues of the status of 'wisdom literature' as a genre, its oral origins, and its perception and circulation in antiquity. It is with the aim of bringing these problems to the surface, and reframing the debate about them, that this conference intends to approach 'wisdom literature'.

Focus and aims of the conference

The aim of this two-day conference is to create a fruitful and synergic environment for debate by bringing together postgraduates and early career researchers from across the UK and abroad working on, or interested in, ancient wisdom literature. Particularly, we aim at exploring and dissecting the intertwining of literary and religious elements in texts that are normally labelled as 'wisdom literature'. The *Pseudo-Phocylidea* was the work that inspired this conference, as 'in the dynamics of its textual interactions, the poem evidences what may be called a principle of dual referentiality, integrating elements from two distinct referential fields, the literature of Hellenistic Jewish morality and the literature of classical Greek poetics' (Wilson 2005: 14). Indeed, we seek to investigate whether and how, in general, a dual religious-literary referentiality is a constitutive aspect of those texts traditionally considered as 'wisdom' texts. We are interested in looking at how this integration embodies the 'cumulative' character of wisdom, and we finally aim to consider how such an approach can contribute to the debate concerning the status of 'wisdom literature' as a genre.

To foster discussion on these themes, we have selected papers that explore the integration of religious elements and literary echoes in wisdom texts dated from the Ancient Near Eastern Civilizations to Late Antiquity, while engaging with the definition and application of the label 'wisdom literature' and reflecting on cross-fertilisation and transcultural influences.

Conference programme

Each paper will be followed by a personalised response from an advanced academic with research interests in wisdom literature, and a plenary discussion.

Thursday 30th May:

- ♦ Registration from 1.30 pm
- ♦ 2.15 pm: opening address by Dr Daniel Orrells, Head of the Department of Classics, King's College London
- ♦ 2.30 - 4 pm: session 1
 - 2.30 - 3.15 pm
Emanuele Zimbardi, 'La Sapienza' University of Rome and Freie Universität Berlin
Aḥiqar from loyal courtier to wise teacher: the making of a parenetical story in Official Aramaic, Greek, and Syriac
Response by Dr Pavlos Avlami, King's College London
 - 3.15 - 4 pm
Ivo Martins, Leiden University
Reframing wisdom through liminality in Akkadian literature
Response by Dr Lindsay Allen, King's College London
- ♦ 4 - 4.30 pm: coffee break
- ♦ 4.30 - 6 pm: session 2
 - 4.30 - 5.15 pm
Michela Piccin, Northeast Normal University, Changchun
Motifs distribution in Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi and Babylonian Theodicy
Response by Dr Jana Matuszak, SOAS University of London
 - 5.15 - 6 pm
Suzanna R. Millar, University of Edinburgh
A proverb in a collection is dead?
Response by Prof Paul Joyce, King's College London
- ♦ 7.30 pm: conference dinner (Côte Brasserie, Tavistock Street, London WC2E7PA)

Friday 31st May:

- ♦ 9.30 - 11 am: session 3
 - 9.30 - 10.15 am
Charles P. Comerford, University of Birmingham
What should we talk about when we talk about wisdom? Terminology, definition, and genre in ancient Jewish wisdom studies
Response by Prof Hindy Najman, University of Oxford

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- 10.15 - 11 am
Rachel Frish, Bar-Ilan University, Tel-Aviv
When prophecy meets wisdom: examination of the manner in which חכמים are addressed in Jeremiah 8 as a case study
Response by Dr Jonathan Stökl, King's College London
- ♦ 11 - 11.30 am: coffee break
 - ♦ 11.30 am - 1 pm: session 4
11.30 am - 12.15 pm
David Hodgkinson, University of Oxford
Battlefields as teaching spaces
Response by Dr Shaul Tor, King's College London
 - 12.15 - 1 pm
Edward Iles, University of Oxford
The Babyloniaka of Berossos of Babylon and the advice literature on legitimate kingship
Response by Prof Hugh Bowden, King's College London
 - ♦ 1 - 2.30 pm: lunch break
 - ♦ 2.30 - 4 pm: session 5
2.30 - 3.15 pm
Carmine Antonio Vox, Università degli Studi di Macerata
The wise Nazianzen. Wisdom features in Gregory's writings and reception
Response by Prof Michael Trapp, King's College London
 - 3.15 - 4.00 pm
Aggelos Malisovas, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
Unifying a dualistic nature: Prudentius' poetical corpus as Wisdom Literature testimony
Response by Dr Daniel Hadas, King's College London
 - ♦ 4 - 4.30 pm: coffee break
 - ♦ 4.30 - 5.30 pm: keynote lecture by Prof Dimitri Gutas, Yale University
 - ♦ 5.30 pm: closing remarks by Sara De Martin and Anna Lucia Furlan, King's College London. Wine reception to follow.
 - ♦ 7.30 pm: informal closing dinner (Antalya Restaurant, Southampton Row, London WC1B 4HH)

Abstracts

Session 1

Emanuele Zimbardi, 'La Sapienza' University of Rome and Freie Universität Berlin
Aḥiqar from loyal courtier to wise teacher: the making of a parenetical story in Official Aramaic, Greek, and Syriac

The *Tale of Aḥiqar* is one of the best known stories of the 'wisdom literature' from Antiquity. Originally composed in Aramaic around the 6th c. BC probably in Assyria, this story spread in the Near East and, by the 5th c. BC, it reached Egypt. Echoes of Aḥiqar's story are attested in Greek, especially in the apocryphal book of Tobit (3th-2th c. BC) and in the later *Vita Aesopi*. Thus, the *Tale of Aḥiqar* acquired a multilingual tradition, which continued until the Early Modern times with many translations, the most complete of which is in Syriac.

The tag 'wisdom literature' for the genre of the *Tale of Aḥiqar* is somewhat problematic. Almost all the extant versions of the story present one or two sections of proverbs and short sayings intended to provide some form of moral teaching. In the Medieval (Christian) versions of the Tale these sections are well integrated into the narrative, because they are collocated in two specific occasions when the main character teaches his nephew Nidar. But this was not the case of the most ancient versions of the Tale, as witnessed by the Aramaic text found in Egypt. Here the 'wisdom section' was added at the end of the text, without any relationship with the story.

In this paper we will try to reconsider the categorisation of the *Tale of Aḥiqar* as 'wisdom literature', comparing the narrative of the most ancient versions (in Official Aramaic and in Greek) with the Syriac version. This will permit to ascertain the original core of the *Tale*, in order to understand through which paths and with which cultural aims the intermingling of originally distinct elements (the pseudo-historical narrative and the parenetical sections) has brought to the 'manipulation' of the *Tale of Aḥiqar* in the form of the 'wisdom literature' in which it is known from the Hellenistic period onwards.

Ivo Martins, Leiden University

Reframing wisdom through liminality in Akkadian literature

'Wisdom' was a pervasive concept across the scholarly and literary traditions of several ancient cultures. Acknowledging this pervasiveness, modern scholars assembled texts sharing similar themes into *corpora* under the heading of wisdom literature. Concerning Akkadian sapiential literature (ca. 12th - 1st cent. B.C.E.), assyriologists have collected compositions which address religious, ethical and existential issues. In essence, Assyriology delimited its wisdom *corpus* by replicating the biblical label.

Yet, the universal appeal of wisdom and the ubiquity of these themes over a diverse range of cultural and social contexts have not been conveniently explained. If during the last century, reliable critical editions of that *corpus* were achieved, generic and conceptual studies have been less successful in constructing a theoretical frame and in providing tools to identify wisdom in a less arbitrary manner. The search for a solution led current scholarship to explore the socio-economic setting and the archival context of wisdom texts to explicate the historical conditions surrounding the production of these texts. Still, an optimal solution needs to bring together both these external factors and the internal literary features of the compositions.

Since the common subject of these texts is human experience, the socio-anthropological concept of *liminality*, i.e. a period which suspends social norms and allows their critical evaluation by an individual or a group (Turner, 1969), is instrumental in explaining the social functions of wisdom.

In this paper I will argue that by using narratology to describe plot and characters and by analysing stylistic devices which represent material boundaries and social marginality, we can identify the liminal aspects of wisdom, both in the texts and in their scholarly contexts. This approach offers a more coherent method to detect sapiential literature and explains its function and universal appeal.

Session 2

Michela Piccin, Northeast Normal University, Changchun

Motifs distribution in ludlul bēl nēmeqi and Babylonian Theodicy

‘Wisdom literature’ – currently the centre of academic debate – has recently been problematised by Lambert (1996: 1-2) and Cohen (2013: 8-12) in relation to Mesopotamia. The Mesopotamian wisdom tradition (consisting mainly of literary poems and collections of proverbs) continued for three millennia, from the Sumerian period to the late Babylonian. In this paper, I propose a systematic study of the structure of *ludlul bēl nēmeqi* and *Babylonian Theodicy* by considering their story elements. These two literary masterpieces, which exist as 1st century BC manuscripts and were perhaps composed during the late 2nd, likely existed previously within oral traditions. The distribution of their story elements/motifs in extant sources will first be studied in light of the oral origins of these elements and their perception and circulation in antiquity. Next, the data obtained from these two poems will be compared to ascertain the absence or presence of narrative motifs, as well as the differences and similarities in wording between the two texts to discuss these motifs. This comparison and classification of the data will allow us to reason on the linguistical/philological and textual traditions, along with the cultural aspects that motivated the changes between the two texts. This two-step analysis will discuss why these are the most representative poems from the Mesopotamian wisdom tradition.

Suzanna R. Millar, University of Edinburgh

A proverb in a collection is dead?

‘A proverb in a collection is dead’ – this dictum from paremiologist Wolfgang Mieder is often quoted by biblical scholars with reference to the Book of Proverbs. According to this view, any hypothetical original spoken context of Israelite proverbs has been irreversibly lost in the process of gathering and writing the sayings. *Sitz im Leben* has been sacrificed to *Sitz im Buch*. Their genre is now something quite different, and their potency is pacified. I suggest, however, that the genre conventions of spoken proverbs are still breathing through their written counterparts. ‘Folk’ and ‘elite’ wisdom should not be dichotomised, and this should affect how we read them. Genre studies and paremiology can suggest new strategies for interpretation and use for the biblical proverbs. In this paper, I draw out the implications of this, reading the collections not as dead dictums, but as potent proverbs.

Session 3

Charles P. Comerford, University of Birmingham

What should we talk about when we talk about wisdom? Terminology, definition, and genre in ancient Jewish wisdom studies

The scholarly acceptance that Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes characterise the core of the wisdom literature in the Hebrew bible is almost universal. However, despite this widespread presupposition, there is little agreement, not only on what defines a wisdom text, but also on the generic boundaries that separate wisdom from other literary genres in Jewish antiquity. With no clear consensus on the basic guiding principles for identifying wisdom texts, how can we even begin to talk about wisdom?

This paper raises questions about the validity of the wisdom category with reference to Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes in three parts. The first reflects on the numerous and differing attempts to produce a holistic definition of the wisdom category since its conception in the mid-nineteenth century. The second offers a critique of the traditional form-critical method for identifying wisdom texts, which is based on the recognition of the term 'wisdom' (hokhmah) alongside motifs of knowledge and instruction within a didactic *Sitz im Leben*. The final part will examine two prevailing approaches for distinguishing wisdom texts from other literary genres; 'generic realism' and 'generic nominalism' (Sparks 2005). The former attempts to create clear boundary lines to separate wisdom from other genres by identifying and isolating its salient features, while the latter assumes that all taxonomical classifications of genres are incomplete and therefore the boundaries between genres are naturally and dynamically intertwined.

Concluding remarks will allude to later additions to the wisdom corpus (Sirach, the Wisdom of Solomon, and other newly discovered compositions from the Dead Sea Scrolls), which have further complicated the task of classifying wisdom texts in Jewish antiquity. In light of this supplementary material, this paper proposes a new interpretive method for reconceptualising wisdom in its ancient context, unbound at last from the restrictive and ambiguous filter of the wisdom literature category.

Rachel Frish, Bar-Ilan University, Tel-Aviv

When prophecy meets wisdom: examination of the manner in which חכמים are addressed in Jeremiah 8 as a case study

The book of Jeremiah is characterized by a range of genres, some of which present theological perspectives that differ from one another. One of the most interesting genres is the sapiential genre – texts influenced by or correlating to wisdom literature. This issue has been discussed in the past from various angles, but it seems that its full significance have not been thoroughly examined, both in terms of research of the book of Jeremiah and research of biblical wisdom. In my lecture, I would like to revisit questions that were not fully addressed in research about Jeremiah: how correlations to wisdom are identified in the book, and whether there are unique traits that characterize these correlations.

In the first part of the lecture, I will propose a new methodology for recognizing a correlation to wisdom, by identifying elements that reflect fundamental ideas from wisdom literature and other criteria. For example, I will examine whether the word חכּ, which is common throughout the Bible, could help identify a correlation to wisdom, as well as if and how the many images from the natural world in Jeremiah reflect a sapiential influence, as studies have previously proposed. In the second part, I will focus on Jeremiah 8:4-12 as a case study and explore how the prophet integrates sapiential references into his speech. I will point out unique elements that characterize the sapiential references in this section, as well as in additional texts throughout Jeremiah. Some of these elements share a common theme with the wisdom of the book of Deuteronomy, which is usually dated in studies to the estimated period of the prophet, but which present a different, and in fact critical, outlook on the relationship between wisdom and Torah.

This study opens up new possibilities for evaluating the relationship between the various traditions – prophecy, wisdom and the Deuteronomistic school of thought – and contributes to the ongoing discussion of the definition and development of sapiential tradition.

Session 4

David Hodgkinson, University of Oxford

Battlefields as teaching spaces

Battlefields are places where human identity and mortality are directly confronted. As a result, they also offer excellent opportunities for offering teaching about such questions. In the *Iliad* there are a number of occasions on which the battlefield is used as a setting for teaching, with the meetings between Glaucon and Diomedes, and the latter hero and Apollo foremost among such moments. Meanwhile in the Indian tradition the *Bhagavad Gita* is set on the battlefield at Kurusketra, and depicts Krishna instructing the warrior Arjuna. This paper will examine the didactic function of the battlefield in both texts, and consider the significance of this setting as a setting for instruction. It will explore the notion of the battlefield as an analogy for wider life, and the opportunities offered by this setting for imparting religious teaching. In particular, it will focus on how the messages offered are affected by the circumstances in which the speakers find themselves.

Edward Iles, University of Oxford

The Babyloniaka of Berossos of Babylon and the advice literature on legitimate kingship

The *Babyloniaka* of Berossos of Babylon is the account in Greek language of the history of Babylon, spanning from the creation of the universe to presumably Alexander the Great. Notwithstanding its problematic textual transmission, the appeal of this work is hard to deny – with its translation of Babylonian history and culture into Greek, the *Babyloniaka* represents an encounter between two different traditions, the Greek and the Babylonian.

Since Berossos often corrects Greek misconceptions concerning Babylon, some have viewed this work as an ‘indigenous reaction’ against a form of cultural Greek imperialism – thus being a forerunner of Jewish and Christian apologetic literature (e.g. Sterling 1992: 104-17). A recent line of interpretation has, instead, recognised in the *Babyloniaka* a manual on legitimate Babylonian kingship – for example, Haubold (2013: 32) has defined it as a ‘*Fürstenspiegel*, a full-blown introduction to the art of legitimate kingship’, whereas Kosmin (2013: 209-11) has noticed the didactic character of Berossos’s historical account, which provides good and bad models of rulers.

The aim of this paper is to push this line of interpretation a little further, by showing how Berossos integrated both Babylonian and Greek ideas on legitimate kingship, and to contextualise this work within the wider production of early-Hellenistic *Peri basileias*. In fact, a comparison of the *Babyloniaka* with Hekataios of Abdera’s *Aigyptiaka* and the *Letter of Aristeas* will show not only that advice literature could take very different literary forms, but also that engaging with different cultural traditions was quite typical of the manuals of *Peri basileias* of the early-Hellenistic period, which aimed to educate and legitimise the new rulers in the eyes of both Greek and non-Greek subjects, thus creating a bridge between the two components of the new Hellenistic states.

Session 5

Carmine Antonio Vox, Università degli Studi di Macerata

The wise Nazianzen. Wisdom features in Gregory's writings and reception

The paper aims to outline the key role of 'wisdom' patterns in Gregory of Nazianzus' corpus, especially in works with didactic purpose. Starting from his own 'programmatic' statements on literature (e. g. c. II.1.39 vv. 60-67; epist. 51, 5), attention will be drawn to his gnomic works as well as to the poetical technique he adopted (e. g. metrical selection or use of acrostics). A special focus on his sources will be needed: biblical ones -of course- on one side, and 'traditional-pagan' ones on the other side, but also oracular and aphoristic sources. Gregory's attitude towards *sentences* was strong and prolific, and very appreciated in Late Antiquity and in Byzantine age: finally, will be sketched an overview of this feature of Nazianzenus' reception.

Aggelos Malisovas, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

Unifying a dualistic nature: Prudentius' poetical corpus as Wisdom Literature testimony

The term of "Wisdom Literature" is nowadays considered an academic burden' striving to reconcile the strict scientific meticulousness with such a vague and, in a way, abstract, terminology, the so called Wisdom Texts are lately gaining much attention, bridging the gap between incongruous periods of time, ranging over from Ancient Babylon to Late Antiquity.

In my speech I intend to break down the work of Prudentius, probably the most eminent poet of Late Antiquity and Christian Latin Poetry per se, in terms of Wisdom Literature. The Spanish poet, fervent Christian as he was, had chosen to incorporate in his oeuvre a variety of biblical episodes, creating a literary composition of a dualistic nature: a hybrid of pagan and Christian. In this ambiguous environment, I aim at analysing Prudentius' use of these purely religious themes as behavioural and ethical *exempla* of defining and marking the boundaries of the true Christian way of life and the overall moral system. Concentrating mainly on Prudentius' most famous opus, aka *Psychomachia*, I will talk about the way he exploits religious themes and motifs (by portraying specific scenes and *personae*) merging them with a purely pagan context, but at the same time examine his integrated didactic purposes which are brought up through his poetry, therefore functioning as an intellectual preacher' a poet serving God. Afterwards, I will be focusing on the very sense of Wisdom, as expressed in the closure of *Psychomachia* with the abstract form of *Sapientia*, an episode which plays a decisive part in the whole *corpus*. Finally, I will broach the matter of *genre* classification and typological representation, speculating on whether Prudentius' *opera* are to be considered a -maybe significant- part of the Wisdom Literature field, thus contributing to the never-ending academic research of the aforementioned literary genre.