

WISDOM
(Περί σοφίας)

ISTVÁN JELENITS *

The Hungarian equivalent of the word *wise* 'bölcös' comes originally from the Turkish language at the time of the Conquest (around 1000 A. C.)¹ The noun and the adjective have the same form. According to a dictionary's definition a wise man is able to unite mature and calm deliberation, good sense and good judgement with great knowledge and experiences, moreover, he or she is well-respected by the coevals and the posterity. It is interesting to think about the nuance differences between *wise* and *clever* in the sense of meaning and use. For example, a bandit can be clever, but presumably never wise. It seems like the term *wise* stands for not only to the mind's vividness but some kind of a virtue as well. *The smart one yields and the fool donkey suffers*. But a wise man might be more understandable than a smart one. He or she does not escape from the less educated people but is able to have a word with them. What had Socrates said about himself –according Plato- in the Apology? Once Pythia from Delphos was asked whether there is anyone who is wiser than Socrates. And she answered no. According to Socrates the secret of his wisdom is his exact knowledge about how less he knows, unlike anyone else who thinks too much of his or her necessarily limited wisdom. A clever man is priggish but those who own the true wisdom are humble and not because politeness.

Socrates had never declared his wisdom, he claimed instead that he did not own wisdom, he just loved it. This is the reason why we approach him as the founder of philosophy. But looking for a name here in Europe, which truly represent wisdom, our first thought will be a biblical character. Who does not know the name of King Solomon?

Socrates was a simple civil in Athena, and although Solomon was a one of a much humbler nation, since he was a Hebrew, he was the son and inheritor of King David. The word wisdom stands for something different in his relation. According to the Bible David made Solomon his inheritor at the time of his lingering death, and Solomon turned to God. The temple of Jerusalem was not built yet, so he sacrificed to God on the top of the mountain, and the Lord appeared in his dream. Let's quote the biblical text itself:

“In Gibeon, Solomon had a vision of the Lord in a dream by night; and God said to him, Say what I am to give you. And Solomon said, Great was your mercy to David my father, as his life before you was true and upright and his heart was true to you; and you have kept for him this greatest mercy, a son to take his place this day. And now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in the place of David my father; and I am only a young boy, with no knowledge of how to go out or come in. And your servant has round him the people of your selection, a people so great that they may not be numbered, and no account of them may be given. Give your servant, then, a wise heart for judging your people, able to see what is good and what evil; for who is able to be the judge of this great people? Now these words and Solomon's request were pleasing to the Lord. And God said to him, Because your request is for this thing, and not for long life for yourself or for wealth or for the destruction of your haters, but for wisdom to be a judge of causes; I have done as you said: I have given you a wise and far-seeing heart, so that there has never been your equal in the past, and never will there be any like you in the future. And with this I have given you what you made no request for: wealth and honour, so that no king was ever your equal. And if you go on in my ways, keeping my laws and my orders as your father David did, I will give you a long life. And Solomon, awakening, saw that it was a dream; then he came to Jerusalem, where he went before the ark of the agreement of the Lord, offering burned offerings and peace-offerings; and he made a feast for all his servants. “ /I. Kin. 5-15./ The Lord appears in the dream of the chosen ones in the Old Testament quite commonly. The same happened with

* The author: *István Jelenits* (1932), pious monk, theologian, writer. He was ordained a priest in Eger, 1959. He was the range leader of pious order in Hungary, between 1985-95. He has been the teacher of the biblical subjects at the Kalazantinum College of Theology since 1965 and at the The Sapientia College of Theology as the successor institution since 2000. He has been the teacher, later Head of Department and Professor Emeritus of the Department of Aesthetics at Pázmány Péter Catholic University.

¹ According to the Oxford Dictionary *wise* means having or showing experience, knowledge, and good judgement.

Jacob as he went to Haran. One night he put a stone under his head and felt asleep. "And he had a dream, and in his dream he saw steps stretching from earth to heaven, and the angels of God were going up and down on them. And he saw the Lord by his side, saying, I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac:"/Gen. 28, 12-13./ In the same way, when Joseph started his journey to Egypt: "And God said to Israel in a night-vision, Jacob, Jacob. And he said, Here am I. And he said, I am God, the God of your father" /Gen. 46, 2-3/. It is interesting that Gods asked Solomon immediately what he wants.

The dream was not unexpected to Solomon; he was waiting for it because he made a thousand burned offerings on the altar. He felt asleep in a holy place: the great pharaohs slept in the sanctum to meet the God.

It seems like Solomon is not even surprised by the vision. He does not get confused, his wish is humble but deliberated. He prays for wisdom, in order to his governance becomes blissful. Although he claims his inexperienced humbly, he is wise enough not to ask for something other youths might will. He resembles to Socrates, who is wiser than anybody else since he knows the limits of his knowledge.

However, there is a significant difference between the two men. Solomon is a governor. He wishes for wisdom to be able to create peace between dependants, to hold the scales even and to live peacefully together with other nations. Although Socrates was also interested in politics, he lived in a democratic system and he was not responsible for the other's happiness as a governor.

In the Bible there is a very interesting story which shows us the power of this great wisdom given by the God and how this power makes this unexperienced young man to a great king. "Then came there two women, that were harlots, unto the king, and stood before him. And the one woman said, O my lord, I and this woman dwell in one house; and I was delivered of a child with her in the house. And it came to pass the third day after that I was delivered, that this woman was delivered also: and we were together; there was no stranger with us in the house, save we two in the house. And this woman's child died in the night; because she overlaid it. And she arose at midnight, and took my son from beside me, while thine handmaid slept, and laid it in her bosom, and laid her dead child in my bosom. And when I rose in the morning to give my child suck, behold, it was dead: but when I had considered it in the morning, behold, it was not my son, which I did bear. And the other woman said, Nay; but the living is my son, and the dead is thy son. And this said, No; but the dead is thy son, and the living is my son. Thus they spake before the king. And the king said, Bring me a sword. (...) Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other. Then spake the woman whose the living child was unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it. Then the king answered and said, Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it: she is the mother thereof. And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had judged; and they feared the king: for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him, to do judgment." /I. Kin. 3, 16-28./

With his wisdom Solomon is not capable to look at the two women and decide immediately which one is lying, instead, he commands the child to be cut in half and shared between the two. He is looking for the reaction of the women for this obviously cruel and just seemingly fair decision. Those, who loves the child and would rather give up the child than see it killed is the true mother. Solomon was gifted with the wisdom of the kings and the teachers!

But this wisdom was not only a leader's leery set of mind. The Book of Kings shows us Solomon's international fame with excessive words: "And God gave Solomon a great store of wisdom and good sense, and a mind of wide range, as wide as the sand by the seaside. And Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt... and he had a great name among all the nations round about. He was the maker of three thousand wise sayings, and of songs to the number of a thousand and five. He made sayings about all plants, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop hanging on the wall; and about all beasts and birds and fishes and the small things of the earth. People came from every nation to give ear to the wisdom of Solomon, from all the kings of the earth who had word of his wisdom." /I. Kin. 4, 29-34./

But Solomon appears not only in the Book of Kings and in the Books of Chronicles but we can meet his figure in many Wisdom Books as well. Although the authors of this books lived and worked much later than the governance of Solomon, they still represented the king's name and magistry. They belonged to the same luminary which was taken over and established by Solomon in the Hebrew culture from their neighbours. Let's quote from the Book of Proverbs: "How long will you be sleeping, O hater of work? when will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little rest, a little folding of the hands in sleep: Then loss will come on you like an outlaw, and your need like an armed man." /Proverbs 6, 9-11./. The background of this knowledge is a simple observe with the focus on the nature's laws.

Wisdom appears personalized in another well-known part of the Book of Proverbs. It accosts and calls people: "Through me kings have their power, and rulers give right decisions. Through me chiefs have authority, and the noble ones are judging in righteousness. Those who have given me their love are loved by me, and those who make search for me with care will get me... Happy is the man who gives ear to me,

watching at my doors day by day, keeping his place by the pillars of my house. For whoever gets me gets life, and grace from the Lord will come to him.” /8, 15-17; 34-35./

Many other biblical texts exist about Solomon: the Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs in the Old Testament or the Book of Wisdom and Book of the All-Virtuous Wisdom of Joshua ben Sira in the Deuterocanonical books from the time of Hellenism. There is a comparison of the intellectual lifestyle and the job and the ploughman's and craftsmen's way of life In the latter one. “Without them no city could be lived in (...) But they are not sought out for the council of the people, nor are they prominent in the assembly. They do not sit on the judge's bench, nor can they understand law and justice. (...) How different the person who devotes himself to the study of the law of the Most High! (...) He preserves the discourses of the famous, and goes to the heart of involved sayings; He seeks out the hidden meaning of proverbs, and is busied with the enigmas found in parables. He is in attendance on the great, and appears before rulers. He travels among the peoples of foreign lands to test what is good and evil among people. His care is to rise early to seek the Lord his Maker, to petition the Most High, To open his mouth in prayer, to ask pardon for his sins. If it pleases the Lord Almighty, he will be filled with the spirit of understanding; He will pour forth his words of wisdom and in prayer give praise to the Lord. /Sirach 38, 32-34, 39, 1-6/.

The parsondom was only heritable at that time, and in this sense we might feel the unique weight of this statement. You had to be born to be a priest but anybody could become a wise man (and a member of the clerisy) who was talented, hard-working and motivated enough. A wise, literate man exercised some public power as representing the justice in litigation cases.

The biblical Solomon integrates the tradition of wisdom from the surrounding pagan cultures into the Hebrew's belief system. Although his nation follows a unique way in religion, with this integration he guarantees the place of his people between their neighbours in order to live together more-or-less peacefully. The essentials of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian culture would have not been able to be a part of the European tradition based on the Greek-Roman heritage. The memory of those ancient cultures were not forgotten completely, however, most of their posthumous were lost. The secret of the Egyptian hieroglyphs was solved just in Napoleon's time thence are we able to read and understand them. And jet, the legacy of this old and wise culture managed to find a way to the European knowledge thro' the Bible.

However, as a result of the recent unsuspected archaeological discoveries this seemingly vanished world has finally come to life again. Sumerian, Assyrian and Babylonian archives, libraries has turned up out of the blue, and we are able to read, understand and access the new-discovered materials, including those texts, which were probably the model of Wise Solomon's biblical stories and was thought to lost forever.

Meanwhile the archaeologists have revealed the background of the Old Testament. It seems like that the tradition which created the figure of Solomon amended the builder of the First Temple in Jerusalem with some foreign motives. It has turned out that the famous story about the Judgement of Solomon occurred in many other narrations in connection with wise pagan kings lived centuries earlier than the biblical king. The Israelites had borrowed the motive and integrated them into the life story of their leader.

In a historical point of view lots of facts stated by the Bible about the time and personality of the wise Solomon seems to be inexact. The inspiration of the Holy Books does not provide its historical authenticity nor the grounding of its scientific point of view. On the other hand, the instruction about wisdom in relation with the figure of Solomon, which inherited from the forgotten centuries before the history of Israel, has had an important affect in the European way of thinking. Moreover, this old intellectual heritage is now inseparable from Abraham's Moses's and Jesus Christ's images of God.

I mention only a few writings from the relevant recent literature:

Israel Finkelstein, Neil A. Silberman: David und Salomo. Archäologen entschlüsseln einen Mythos, C. H. Beck Verlag, München 2006.

Le roi Salomon, un héritage en question : hommage à Jacques Vermeulen. Sous la direction de Claude Lichtert et Dany Nocquet. Lessius, Bruxelles. Collection Le livre et le rouleau, numéro 33, (octobre 2008)

Alain Le Nineze: La sagesse: La force du consentement. Ed. "Autrement" – Collection: Morales n°28. 2000.

Translated by Kata Radács

Online sources:

<http://biblia.hit.hu/bible/33>

<http://www.usccb.org/bible/sirach/39>

© DKE 2017

<http://www.southeast-europe.org>
Email: [dke\[at\]southeast-europe.org](mailto:dke[at]southeast-europe.org)

Note: *Respected Researchers*, if you make a reference to this article or quote part of it, please send us an email at [dke\[at\]southeast#europe.org](mailto:dke[at]southeast#europe.org) to let us know that. *Please cite the article as follows:*
István Jelenits: Wisdom. *International Relations Quarterly*, Vol. 7. No.4 (Winter 2016-7) 4 p.
Thank you for your kind collaboration. *Editor-in-Chief*