

Wisdom Words

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Wisdom Words (from the Hebrew)

Using this crib sheet

This page may not appeal to every visitor, so feel free to give it a miss. It's simply a crib sheet for people who might be interested in key words in the Hebrew Bible that describe classes of high-level government officials and others who were responsible for domestic politics and international relations in the old-world Middle East, particularly in ancient Israel. Definitions of words come from various authorities that I have found useful in my work over the years on The Wisdom Project.

Being a crib sheet, however, these are merely very rough notes. I'm offering them here to possibly save you weeks of homework, and these notes should not be thought to represent any assumptions I may or may not have, or any conclusions I have drawn. Also, don't be misled by the title of this page, "Wisdom Words." That is merely a convenience. Although the hkm words, below, denote the main Hebrew word for "wisdom," other terms do not directly denote "wisdom." All of the terms, however, describe diverse classes of civic and political actors in fields of domestic governance and international affairs. (As today in a president's or a prime minister's administration, many classes of elite professionals were necessary for the proper functioning of royal courts of the old-world.) To hold such offices in the old-world Middle East, education in wisdom was usually required. This was true in ancient Israel and in the surrounding nations. My research, then, quite naturally led me to include notes when scholars discussed political persons and offices from nations such as Egypt, Babylon, and Persia. Such notes are included in the crib sheet.

This crib sheet page makes a good companion to Wisdom Actors, part 1 and Wisdom Actors, part 2, in helping to illuminate biblical political narratives. It may also be useful to refer to at times when you run across any these words in an article on this site, though brief explanations are usually provided in such places.

This list of terms is far from exhaustive. I made notes only on the words that were relevant to my work on The Wisdom Project. All Hebrew words are spelled without their diacritical marks.

Comments are welcome here

SOURCE ABBREVIATIONS

AV: ?Authorised Version? of the Bible; i.e., the King James translation

NIV: ?New International Version? of the Bible

OT: Old Testament

VR: Gerhard Von Rad, Wisdom in Israel (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1986) **WM:** William McKane, Prophets and Wise Men (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1965)

VG: Willem A. VanGemeren, Gen. Ed., New International Dictionary of Old testament Theology & Exegesis, in 5 Vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997)

For books of Bible: Ex., for Exodus; Dt. for Deuteronomy; Jer., for Jeremiah.

For source pages: ?VR20? = Gerhard Von Rad, page 20; ?WM15? = William McKane, page 15. And so on.

BEGIN NOTES

See: VR

hakam (adj) [VR20], translated ?wise? [always?], and not only for people of a particular position. It describes people who are in some sense in some aspect of life ??competent', ?skilled'? [VR20]. See, e.g., Exod. 36:8; 31:3, 6; 35:35; 1 Kings 7:14; Isa 40:20; Jer. 9:16; Ezek. 27:8. VR lists many other characteristics denoting broader coverage.

hakam as ?position?:

?In the institutional sphere? [VR21], there seem to be at least two positions in which the holders are credited with being wise: the king and his highest advisers. See, for king, Isa. 19:11; 10:13; Ezek 28:3; for high officials, Gen. 41:33; Isa. 19:11; 30:4; Jer. 50:35; 51:57.

VR develops in the idea of wisdom teachers as a vocational group, a scholarly teacher [VR20ff]. ?... the adjective 'wise' is used as a noun to describe a vocational post? [VR21]. See Jer 18:18 where ?there is linked with posts of priest and prophet a post of wise men, whose function consisted in giving counsel,? [VR21] such as political advice. See also Ezek 7:26 (elders). Jer. 50:35ff, the wise men of Babylon, linked to individuals and officials (?r?m; VR21) linked to politicians.

What was the activity of these wise persons?

One ancient poem, Sirach [VR22-23], describes in some detail the ideal wise person, who, first and foremost, ?devotes himself to the study of the law of the Most High? (Sir. 39:1a). Here is a person competent in law, and the primary object of study was law. The law was that of the Most High.

The poem notes that the wise person, here, will study not only the law of the Most High but the wisdom of surrounding nations in relation to morals and ethics (... ?will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients and will be concerned with prophecies; he will preserve the discourse of notable men? (Sir. 39:1b-2a).

Further, the wise person will have a knack for understanding very difficult things, things unfathomable to others (... ?[he will] penetrate the subtleties of parables; he will seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs and be at home with the obscurities of parables? (Sir. 39:2b-3a).

This sort of study gets noticed in high places, therefore the wise person ?will serve among great men and appear before rulers; he will travel though the lands of foreign nations for he tests the good and the evil among men? (Sir. 39:4).

Coming full circle: ?He will set his heart to rise early to seek the Lord who made him and he will make supplication before the Most High; he will open his mouth in prayer and make supplication for his sins? (Sir 39:5). The wise's life and influence, therefore, is founded on a life of humble prayer, which implies a personal relationship with God. This God, and God alone, can furnish the wise ?with a charisma which would enable him faithfully to fulfil his teaching office? [VR22].

Still, after all is said and done, it seems to be a gift because it is all dependent on ?if the great Lord is willing? (Sir. 39:6).

Other characteristics, VR22, Sir., about conclusion of the matter, e.g., great respect worldwide, etc.

See final parag, VR23.

Those who don't include this seeking of the Lord and the study of His law cannot be fitted into the class described in Sirach. They may be worldly wise but not wise in the sense indicated.

See: WM

hkm [WM15] very wide range of meaning in OT. [see VG, below]

hkm. Range of meaning in OT lit is considerable. Technical skill; manual dexterity (Ex. 28:3; 35:25; 36:4; Isa. 40:20; Jer. 10:9; Ez. 27:8-9; 1 Chron. 22:15; 2 Chron. 2:7, 12; diverse types of technical skill and manual dexterity in these vv)

Part of WM's thesis: ?the old wisdom? lacks ethical commitment [WM16]. I'd debate that. But he modifies his own point [WM16] at

end of first parag, taking it up again in Cpt7. For WM, 'old wisdom' that wisdom before the prophetic was on the scene big time represents, generally, a lack of piety and ethical commitment.

hakam [WM16] 2 Sam. 13:3: passage illustrating lack of ethical commitment in 'old wisdom.' WM: Jonadab's wisdom is shrewd in its conception, enabling Amnon to satisfy his desire. Wisdom, here, is mere competence and efficiency to secure an immoral end (for Amnon). This, according to WM, reveals 'the ethical indifference or neutrality of hkm.'

hokma (wisdom); hakam (wise man) [WM16] 1 Kgs. 2:5-9: passage illustrating lack of ethical commitment in old wisdom. Mere consideration of political expediency prevails (in outcome of David's and Solomon's wisdom). Verse 6 hokma (wisdom), verse 9 hakam (wise man). David is advising Solomon to 'assassinate men who, in his judgment, have become too bad political risks to be allowed to live...' [WM16]

skl; sekel (aptitude), Dan 8:25. Passage indicating lack of ethical commitment in old wisdom in Antiochus Epiphanes, in which deceit or intrigue will prosper in his hand.

WM16-17: 'it has often been noted that this hard-headed wisdom is international, that it is specially oriented towards the arts of government and that it has a close affinity with political and administrative aptitudes. It is empirical in its spirit, with an emphasis on intellectual rather than ethical values and so well adapted to the hard realities of statecraft and government. Its practitioners were therefore pre-eminently an élite who were in the higher echelons of government and administration and we shall see that the literature of this wisdom was directed particularly towards the training of statesmen, diplomats and administrators in the school whose educational discipline was shaped to this end. The title of 'Scribe' was given to such high officials in Egypt and that of 'Scribe' or 'Secretary' to their counterparts in Babylonia and Assyria... The same technical sense of 'Scribe' or 'Secretary' is attested for the OT...'

mazkir; soper; yoes [WM17-18] Two exs of above: 2 Sam. 8:16-18; (20:23-25). An 'official list of the leading members of David's establishment, ecclesiastical, civil and military' [WM17]. Two political officials mentioned here: Jehoshaphat (who is a mazkir) and Seraiah (who is a soper). 1 Chron. 27:32-34 lists info about certain other high officials of David's government, e.g., Jonathon (an uncle of David) and Ahithophel: both are yoes ('counselor?'), the former to the king's sons, the latter to the king. Hushai is another key political official holding an advisory office as king's friend.

Jonathon, who is also a soper, is credited with having 'one of the fundamental virtues of the professional political advisor in that he is perspicacious or a 'man of insight' [WM18]. He 'belongs to a professional class whose members are distinguished by their mental habits and who serve in high places of government and administration' [WM18].

'Ahithophel and Hushai were leading statesmen in the reign of David [who played influential roles] as policy-makers in the Ahithophel-Absalom story (II Sam. 15-17)' [WM18].

1 Chron. 27:32-34 doesn't, however, throw much light on the precise relationship between soper and yoes, or soper and hakam [WM18].

s'r'm [WM18] 1 Kgs 4:1-6, list of Solomon's chief officials (civil, military, ecclesiastical), all called s'r'm. Hushai replaced as king's friend by Zabud, who is also a priest, 'perhaps as an indication that the ecclesiastical establishment could be politically influential' [WM19]. WM notes that because this list 'is large than those coming from David's reign,' it could point to a larger bureaucracy.

soper hammelek [WM19] 'Royal Secretary,' 2 Kgs 12:10, acted with the high priest in religious financial matters. Another indication of influence of religious on political. 'This Royal Secretary,' McKane notes, 'should probably be equated with the soper of 2 Sam. 8:17 and 20:25 and so is Joash's Secretary of State.' This is suggested by events in the story. See 2 Kgs 22:3ff; 2 Chron 24:11 [WM19]. 'The role of 'Secretary' here may be an illustration of the overlapping of the functions of civil and ecclesiastical establishments' [WM19-20]. From events in Isa. 37:1ff, it seems that perhaps, but not conclusively, it was within the purview of the

'Secretary' to enquire of God through a prophet in time of distress.

hassoper (Sheba is) and hammazkir (Joah is) [WM20] 2 Kgs 18:18 (Isa. 36:3) and Eliakim (?al habbayit (?high political office, ? not a translation, though?); bayit = palace, house, dwelling, building, who are the king's (which one?) leading advisors, constituting, it appears, the inner circle of government (cabinet). [Joseph as ?al habbayit? See Gen. 41:40: ?you shall be over my house.?]

hassoper of Jer. 36:11ff is one of the statesman (s?r?m). A cabinet meeting takes place in his room [WM21]. See WM122, fn 1, ?room.? The statesman of Jer 36:11ff is ?identified with the hassoper ... and he seems to act here as the king's first minister? [WM21].

hassoper in Jer 37:15 associated with the s?r?m. [WM21, & explanation of Jer.'s prison house; dealing w/ political prisoner]

Soper, "Secretary" [WM21]. See Ezra 4:8-9, 17, 23. Shimshai, a high civil servant, a colleague of leading political officials. Note cap ?S?. Soper? ?appears before the Persian period in Babylonian Aramaic with the meaning of 'Secretary'.... Since the Persian kings used imperial Aramaic as the language of diplomacy, they retained soper as the designation of an official, and the terminology transposed in Hebrew is used by Nehemiah of an official in his memorandum (hassoper, Neh. 13:13)? [WM21, fn 6, citing H. H. Schaeder].

soper [WM21] apparently title of an official w/ military functions. Jer 52:25 (soper sar has?sb?) could be translated as 'The Secretary of the Field Marshal.' ?The Hebrew of the parallel passage[?], however, is hassoper sar has?sb?' (2 Kings 25:19) and this has to be translated 'The Secretary, commander of the Army', which could be paraphrased as 'Secretary of State for War'. It is stated in both places that the soper was responsible for levying the people for military service...? [WM22].

soper ?also appears in the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5:14) as the title of a military official and the s?bet of this soper is obviously a symbol of his authority. The parallel word in this verse (meh?q?q) appears elsewhere in the OT [where?] with the meaning 'staff', but its literal translation would be 'inscriber' or 'one who promulgates a decree' which would tend to support the conclusion that this is an official who is responsible for muster? [WM22].

Many of the above, and other, words indicate officials who functioned as various kinds of high-level secretaries, such as what today we could call Secretary of State (US) or Foreign Minister (UK), or Secretary of Defense (US).

Part of WM's thesis is that in passages such as Ex. 28:3 the skill of the craftsperson is not portrayed in terms of native endowment and not the result of a period of rigorous apprenticeship, but is a gift of God. I'd debate this.

?s? and d?b?r [WM13]. ?Now in those days the advice (?s?) Ahithophel gave was like that of one who inquires of God? (2 Sam. 16:23; NIV). ?Now in those days, the counsel (?s?) which Ahithophel gave was as one consulted the oracle (d?b?r; ?word?) of God? (ibid; AV). Ahithophel, before his defection to Absalom, was a chief political advisor to King David, and it is clear from this verse that his policy advice (?s?) in David's royal court was so compelling so as to have taken on the remarkable stature of being listened to as if it were the word (d?b?r) of God itself. Maybe this is a unique case. Nevertheless, it shows the heights to which the influential role of wisdom can play in matters of state, as well as the reputation enjoyed by those who have such wisdom. [how one gets such wisdom is the question; perhaps to rise to such great heights it must be founded on piety and an ethic based on the fear of the Lord; prophetic wisdom?]

?There are two tasks which this verse invites us to undertake. The first is the general elucidation of the political role of old wisdom and the second a consideration of ?s? and d?b?rin the Old Testament relation to statesmanship and political decisions.? [WM13]

l?b mind/heart, but see for good distinction w/ some uses [WM15]

b?n? perspicacity (longed-for penetration and clarity; insight and clarity of purpose [WM15; VR53])

See #2681, VG130ff, Vol.2, Gerald H. Wilson, article.

[root] hkm q. be wise, become wise, act wisely; pi. instruct, make wise; pu. instructed, expert; hi. make wise; hipt. show oneself to be wise, show one's wisdom, pretend to be wise; ni. be wise, become wise (#2681); nom./adj. (hakam), wise (person), sage; fit, skilled, able, experienced, wise (#2682); nom. (hokmâ), technical skill, aptitude, experience, good sense, wisdom, Wisdom (personified) (#2683); (hakmot), wisdom (#2684). [related vocab at end of list not included here]

basic meaning suggested by the q. verb: be/become wise; gain wisdom.

Re verb usage:

?Various proverbs encourage the reader to seek and acquire wisdom through study, experience, and association with sages? [VG2:131]. Prov. 27:11; 21:11; 9:9; see Dt. 32:39; 1 Kgs 4:31 [5:11]; Job 32:9; Zech 9:2; etc.

?The pi. verb relates to the basic sense of the q. by employing the factitive [one use of tr. v. to modify dir. obj.] meaning, make wise, teach wisdom? [VG131]. One can influence one's own getting of wisdom, and through instruction influence others getting it. Ps. 105:22, Jos. teaches elders wisdom. Job 35:11, Elihu says God makes us wiser than the birds. Ps. 119:98, the commandments make one wiser than one's enemies. [the latter is again an indication of two wisdoms, i.e., not everyone who is wise is biblically wise. See also VG131, bottom of pg for another way of saying this]

Other variations of meaning I have omitted from VG131.

Re adj./nom.[verb subj] usage:

Occasionally difficult to distinguish adj./nom. hakam between adj. (wise/skilled) and nom. (wise[person]/sage) usages. The normal distinctions hold, with the adj. for the most part modifying a nom. (geber hakam, Job 34:34; is hakam in Gen 41:33, etc.) The adj. is nom. when standing alone w/o accompanying nom. (Job 17:10; Eccl 7:7). The adj. use prior, describing the ability of persons of great skill or wisdom, akin to the French savoir faire (having knowledge/ability required to accomplish a particular activity). ?Thus hakam may describe the more physical skills associated with those who have mastered crafts (construction of idols, Isa 3:3; 40:20) or other occupational skills (sailing, Ezek 27:8), while in other contexts, the more mental skills normally associated with intellectual wisdom are in view? (Prov. 12:15; 17:28) [VG132].

See (a), VG132 for adj. hakam descriptions of its use of the variously skilled. Note: hakam leb (Ex. 31:6; 35:10; Job 9:4; etc., wise of heart. or mind, see hakam above).

adj. hakam describing the less positive traits of cunning, shrewdness. 2 Sam. 13, Amnon turns to Jonadab for seduction advice. Jonadab is described as a very wise man (NIV), hakam me?d. ?Perhaps cunning or shrewd might be more appropriate here? [VG132]. ?Similarly, when David counsels Solomon to have Shimei killed, his ironic reference to Solomon in this context as ?a man of wisdom? (1 Kgs 2:9) would seem more a reference to pragmatic political shrewdness. Such skill, cunning, shrewdness can be the opposite of true wisdom as the prophetic play on words in Jer 4:22 makes clear: ?My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled (hakamim) in doing evil; they know not how to do good (cf. Job 5:13)? [VG132].

adj./nom. hakam. The large majority of this usage refers to the more mental/intellectual [how does this jive, or not, w/ wisdom as ?theory and practice??] trait(s?) of wisdom or describe persons who possess or exhibit that trait. ?This is most clear when hakam is supported in the context by other words of perception such as n?bôn (Gen 41:33; Deut 1:13; 4:6; 1 Kgs 3:12; Hos 14:9[10]), or contrasted with negative words such as n?b?l, stupid (Deut 32:6); kesîl, foolish (Prov 10:1; Eccl 6:8), s?k?l, fool (Eccl 2:19)? [VG133]. Numerous kinds of persons, male and female, kings to ordinary folk, are so described.

The cognate nom. *hokma* (cognate to *hakam*) also describes both physical skill and intellectual wisdom. Skilled tailors (*hakme leb*) are filled with the spirit of wisdom (*ruah hokma*) in Ex. 28:3. Tabernacle craftpersons working in various capacities on the temple are equipped by God with *hokma*, skill (Ex. 31:6; 36:1-2), etc., etc., including political pragmatism, 1 Kgs 2:6; military prowess, Isa. 3:10.

?The large majority of occurrences of *hokma* refer to the intellectual manifestations of wisdom? [VG133]. Prov 12:23; 14:33. ?In this regard, wisdom is often coupled with understanding? [VG133; also see VR53] (*bina*, #1069), Dt 4:6; Job 28:12; Dan. 1:20, etc., or ?knowledge? (*da?at*, #1981), Prov 2:6; Isa. 47:10, etc.

?The seat of wisdom is the heart (*leb*, #4213VG; [but note above usage suggestion of *leb* from WM], the center of moral deliberation and decision making? [VG133]. Prov. 2:10; Eccl. 1:17; 8:16; Ps 90:12.

Wisdom associated with the mature, the advanced in age (Job 12:12; 32:7).

See: ?Wisdom? art'l, VG, VOL4, p1276ff, Gerald H. Wilson:

Perhaps the linking wisdom to WM's ?piety and ethical foundation? lies in ?obedience.? E.g., what is our political wisdom ultimately obedient to? Some -ism or -ology? Or the fear of the Lord? What is the moral foundation of our wisdom. ?In this context, wisdom becomes a synonym for righteousness, while folly is not simply ignorance, but wickedness? [VG/4/1281]. Prov. 17:23; 10:2; 10:16; 11:20-22. ?Ultimately, then, it is the sages' goal to inculcate in their disciples lives of righteous wisdom pleasing to God rather than shrewd, self-focused pragmatism? [VG1281].

This at the least, if not the most, brings us to ?the fear of the Lord.? (Eccl. 12:13; Job 28:28; Prov. 1:7; 2:1-6; 9:10; 15:33; Isa. 33:6.) ?This ?fear' is not abject terror, nor is it simply reverential awe, but a deep-seated humility grounded in an abiding awareness of one's absolute dependence for existence on the undeserved mercy of Yahweh. Only through such humility and dependence is the human heart prepared to perceive and receive the wisdom that God gives? [VG1283]. One would then expect to see in Scripture that wisdom is part of the revealed faith; the linkage of the Torah and wisdom is therefore expected, and it is so in Scripture, see Dt. 4:5-8 (God's wisdom to the nations); Eccl 12:13, and in Sirach, in a number of places, the fear of Yahweh becomes synonymous w/ keeping the Mosaic law (2:16; 26:37; 32:15-17; 3:1-3).

See: #6218 list, VG, VOL3, p283ff, A.R.P. Diamond:

spr: root word meaning: count, number, reckon; declare, count, be recounted, related, rehearsed.

soper: missive document, writing, book.

soper: enumerator, master officer, secretary, scribe.

[*seper*: enumeration, census.]

siprâ: book.

festal seasons are calculated, Lev.15:13

populations are counted, 2 Sam. 24:10

stars and grains of sand are numbered, Gen. 15:5; Ps 139:18

see also Ps 22:17[18]; 50:16, 40:5[6]

innumerable progeny, Gen. 15:5; 16:10; 32:13; cf. 1 Kgs 3:8

verbal acts of praise and worship as laudatory recital (numerations) of God's saving deeds, 1 Chr. 16:24; Isa. 43:21; Jer. 51:10; Ps. 9:1[2]; 26:7; 44:1[2]; 73:28; 96:3; 78:1-72; etc.

ktb words, however, denote: write, be written, a writing, a mark, something written [P1288, VOL 4, VG] E.g., Ex. 17:14; 24:4; 34:1; Nu. 3:2; Dt. 31:19; 2 Sam 11:14; Jer. 32:10; 1 K. 14:19; Jer. 36. Written on heart: Prov 3:3; Jer. 31:33; Dt. 11:18.

See: ?Writing? art'l, VG, VOL4, p1289 [p1286ff]:

soper, (perhaps part. of spr, ?count,? or denominative of soper, ?written document.?

Soper, ?Scribe,? can denote any kind of scribe (Judg 5:14; Isa. 33:18), but more often a named person, such as Jeremiah's secretary, Baruch (Jer. 36), or a royal scribe or secretary (2 Sam. 20:25; 1 Kgs 4:3; 2 Kgs 18:37; etc., Ezra 4:8, etc. Several yrs training. They present the Law to the people (Ezra 7:6, 11; 7:12, 21).

soper m?hîr, ?skillful writer? (Ps. 45:1[2]). E.g., a child could write down a small number of trees (Isa. 10:19), but a scribe's task demanded advanced learning over several yrs. Scribes could be charged w/ lack of care or deliberately tampering w/ God's law (Jer. 8:8).

Their role in presenting the Law to people, Ezra 7:6, 11, 12, 21; Neh. 8.

soperet: writer, Ezra 2:55; Neh. 7:57.

soper: written document [p1291-92]. Legal deed, Dt. 24:1; Job 31:35; Jer. 32:10-14; a letter, 2 Sam. 11:14-15; 1 K. 21:8-11; a bk of papyrus or leather (scroll), Ps 40:7[8]; Jer. 36:2; Ezek 2:9; metaphor, Isa. 34:4.

seper hattora: book of the Law, Dt 28:61

seper zikkaron: scroll of remembrance, Mal 3:16.

seper keritut: certificate of divorce

See: VG, VOL 3, p1271, #8569:

sar, official, chieftain, prince. See #8606, srr: rule, direct, superintend. Sarim, ?rulers.? Ruling or governing by a king or official. Verb: exercising rule and authority like a king or prince, see Abimelech over the city-state of Shechem (Judg 9:22). The exercise of this rule and authority is to be done w/ righteousness (Isa. 32:1), and by the wisdom of God (Prov 8:16).

Sarim generally refers not to the Israelite king himself but to his advisors, e.g., city officials, military officials, royal officials, functionaries in general (Gen. 12:15; 1 Chron 22:17; Esther 1:18; Jer. 21:1)

Sar shalom, Isa. 9:5, 'prince of peace,' for the future Davidic leader.

See: WM, cpt 2

soper is a title applied to a high official (political or other) and the mastery of writing.

sopherim (soperim) are one or more high officials and not merely clerks.

Although soper can mean writer or clerk in a modern sense, 'It is equally clear that the word has a technical or specialized meaning best conveyed by or Secretary in such compounds as Secretary of State, Foreign Secretary, home Secretary, and so on' [WM23].

WM23: believes that the title 'Scribe' as showing an intrinsic connection or correspondence between the office of 'Secretary' and 'writing' is often forced rather than natural... Nevertheless there is at times some connection between 'secretary' and 'writing' in soper by the mere fact that due to the political structure of the Israelite state from David on, particularly due to increasing bureaucracy, there was need for Secretaries of State, et al., to be able to communicate in highly skilled means of writing, since the nation was ruled by the kings through such a cadre of officials, elite. '... it would have been impossible to discharge high political or administrative duties, whether executive or advisory, without this mastery of the involved art of written communication' [WM25].

[On OT usage we still must distinguish between soper as a 'Secretary of State,' or 'Foreign Secretary,' et al., and other writers/scribes.]

Heb. verb spr: 'counting,' 'recounting,' 'narrating.' The connection to 'writing' appears only in the participle soper, which can mean 'writer,' and in the noun soper, 'book,' 'document' [WM26-27].

After explaining Egyptian and other semantic equivalents [e.g, Egyptian, Babylonian] to soper WM writes [pp25-26] : 'I do not therefore believe that the meaning 'write' can be brought into any closer relationship with the title soper, as it is used of a leading official of the king, than that which obtains between 'write' and sapirum' [WM27] [(sapiru) Akkadian; a cognate form of soper].

hossoper: e.g, Shusha and Shebna. Arguments surrounding whether these office holders were Hebrew or foreign. These may have been foreign merely due to a political pragmatism that needed sopherim in the high Israelite political structure in order to interpret and do diplomacy when Babylonian (Shusha) and Aramic (Shebna) were also diplomatic languages along with Hebrew. [Ck WM's assumptions, here, against other sources.]

Ezra as Secretary of State in sense of Akkadian sapirum [Akk. sapiru: to send, to entrust with a mission, to commission, to superintend, to communicate, to write: the idea of 'office' or 'managerial responsibility' rather than 'writing' is primary; sapirum: Secretary of State, manager, agent, writer; Arabic safir: ambassador; WM25].

In Ezra 4:8-9, 17, 23, Shimshai has the title soper [Aramaic term regarded as a loan word from Akk. and derived from sapirum; WM29] and is a colleague of leading officials and should therefore be regarded as a high civil servant in the sense of sapirum.

So there are other things going on w/ these high official's positions other than being just highly skilled writers or scribes only or mainly. Some are 'sagacious and keen witted statesmen' (or sagacious and keen witted Secs of State) [WM29], such as Ahikar, counselor of all Assyria and seal bearer to Esarhaddon, portrayed as the king's first minister [ck OT refs].

Sagacity and mental agility are two of the prime virtues of statesmen more than dexterity in writing.

'... scribe is a general description for an Egyptian official...' [WM31].

soper does have the meaning of 'writer': Baruch (Jer. 36:32; the man in Ezek 9:2-3, a soper [writing kit] on his loins [side]; 'This is a reference to a secretary with a small s and the same is true of the writers in Esth. 3:12 and 8:9, who draft edicts at the Persian court (soper hammelek). Shemaiah who is called hassoper in Chron. 24:6, is also a writer whose job it is to record the rota for priestly duties... This he does in the presence of the king, his chief political advisors (hassoperim), the two chief priests and other senior priests and Levites? [WM33-34]. Zadok (hassoper) in Neh. 13:13 supervises tithe of grain, wine, and oil brought into the storehouse. These usages of soper illustrate something of the variations of soper from writing through administrator to Secretary of State.

Ps 45:1, dexterous writer, soper m'h'r. Similar to Ezra 7:6, where Ezra is soper m'h'r in the t'r? of Moses. This is probably a Jewish paraphrase of Ezra's official Aramaic title, 'Secretary of the Law of the God of Heaven' (Ezra 7:12, 21) [p34]. Ezra is Secretary in the sense of the Akk. sapirum. Literally, soper m'h'r in Ezra 7:6 hovers between 'keen witted Secretary of State' and 'dexterous writer' or 'skillful scholar.' Thus there is some ambivalence (to us, at least) in Ezra's title as soper and his calling.

ma'kîl

If we think a bit more about Daniel as a ma'kîl, he is the epitome of the Old Testament ma'kîl, from skl. Skl is commonly used in literature associated with wisdom (VG, Vol. 3, 1243) in the general sense of being wise (Prov. 15:24) and having good sense and insight (Prov. 19:11; 12:8). In 1 Samuel 25:3, Abigail has 'good understanding' (skl), as does the Levite singled out in Ezra 8:18, and in 1 Chronicles 26:14, Zechariah, the son Shelemiah, is a ma'kîl (wise counselor). Yet in a more specialized sense, it indicates the giving of insight from God. For instance, in 1 Chronicles 28:19, David claims that his skl concerning the details of the new temple to be built resulted from a kind of inspired writing.

In five other references (1 Chron. 22:12; 28:19; Neh. 9:20; Dan. 1:17; 9:25), all but one (Dan. 1:17) are found in context of personal devotions expressing dependence on God for skl. Of these four, three are set in prayers. And the typically positive usage of the word is reversed in Isaiah 44, a long passage mocking those who seek insight from idols: they know nothing, they understand nothing, they cannot see, their minds are closed, they cannot understand (skl, v. 18). Where Aramaic is the language of the book of Daniel, the equivalent to skl is found in 5:11-12 and 14, where pagan officials hear the queen of Babylon acknowledge Daniel as a 'ma'kîl' whose insight derives from the 'spirit of the holy gods.' This qualification gets the wise prophet an audience with the king. Psalm 32, which is itself a ma'kîl, calls the faithful to their knees before the God to whom prayer ought to be made for skl (instruction, v. 8). From the depths of personal commitment to God, therefore, a ma'kîl becomes a person 'who can give insight to the many,' perhaps even in the most perplexing dilemmas (WM, 100, referencing Dan. 11:32).

Remarks

The suffix "im" usually plurals many of above words, such as soperim and hakamim, for the two most prominent classes.

Something of the nature of these wisdom schools is seen in the OT in the training and instruction of Daniel and his three friends. These Jewish youth had to attain exacting physical and intellectual standards. Dan. 1:4, an aptitude for wisdom, hokma. Wisdom was closely associated with 'the educational discipline prescribed for those who would aspire to positions of responsibility in the states' [WM40].

An Israelite could hold high political office in another nation (e.g., Joseph, Ezra, Daniel and his three friends).

They were a wise intellectual elite, prepared by a prolonged and severe intellectual discipline before being selected for high political and administrative offices.

A class of professional wise men seem to have acted as editors and compilers of the oral wisdom tradition, to write it down.

There is some overlap between the hakamim and the soperim [WM42]. E.g., it's not clear if Hushai and Ahithophel were both of the hakamim and the soperim, or just the latter. Whatever the case, not all hakamim were soperim, in the sense that hakam in Scripture is not everywhere the title of a high civil servant [WM42].

The hakamim rebuked by Isaiah and Jeremiah are a class of officials who existed from the time of David onwards, and the emergence of such a governing and administrative class has been correctly correlated with the fundamental political reorganization of Israel which was carried through by David and Solomon. Israel became a state with a new political structure which demanded the creation of a cadre of royal officials through whom the king governed his people? [WM42].

There is no indication in the Hebrew or Christian wisdom lit that a Jewish national who held a political office in another nation ever preached their religion to pagan kings and their foreign colleagues. It's not that they were indifferent to their own covenantal religious belief and the ensuing morality. Rather, they were persuaded that the world in which they had to operate and take decisions was not amenable to the assumptions of religious belief or to a black and white ethical terminology? [WM47].

Evidently, ancient Israel's hakamim and soperim sought policies around the common ground and common goods held by all peoples. Comments are welcome here