

## The semantics of the term 'wisdom' in Biblical writings

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*Abstract:* The different translation versions of certain terms and concepts of the Biblical texts sometimes make it difficult for the interpreters to decide which of the existing versions is more reliable. The present study is embarking upon an analysis of the notion of 'wisdom' as it appears in the *Book of Proverbs* and in some interpretations of the *Septuagint LXX*. The linguistic analysis rests upon the semantic components of the terms and notions under discussion and tries to reach a better understanding of the concept by going through several Biblical writings and interpretations.

*Key-Words:* Wisdom, Semantics, Biblical Writings, *Book of Proverbs*, *Septuagint LXX*

*Wisdom* is defined through its moral materializations and, ultimately, its behavioural ones. In fact, it displays an ensemble of characteristics that we would nowadays group, according to the psycho-pedagogical or psychological canons, into three major categories:

- a) cognitive attributes
- b) emotional attributes
- c) behavioural attributes

As we, no doubt, know from the psycho-sociologists' modern studies regarding public relations, regarding the relations between Self and Other, the three series manifest themselves in close interdependence, the latter of them, that is the connotative dimension, functioning as the result of the first two and of the social action, in synthesis<sup>1</sup>.

The biblical text sends to all these three constituents of the notion of Wisdom either by the usual attributive enumerations, in quasi-synonymical series, or by the equally usual metaphorical images full of symbols. The first that appear are the determinations that regard the intellect, the surrounding world's reception and judgement capacity. *Understanding the deep words, smart judgement, consciousness, right thinking, science, interpretation of tongues of the wise, foresight*, are just a few of the denominations that wisdom carries at the beginning of the *Book of Proverbs*. In effect, it is defined as *self-possession, fear of God, humbleness, compassion, good advice/good word, serene face*, so on and so forth. Finally, on the conative level of social order on which the wise man manifests himself, wisdom evidently means the application of the first two series of determinations: *exultation (towards the parents and towards the divine word), alienation from the evil ones and association with the virtuous ones, unbiased attitude towards fellow men, tireless labour, helping the needy ones by word or action*, etc.

Here and there, the sacred text turns to personification, to illustrating by the negative effects that are especially recurrent in The Ecclesiastes, but that can also be found here:

*“Wisdom preacheth abroad, she uttereth her voice in the streets:*

*At the head of multitudes she crieth out, in the entrance of the gates of the city she uttereth her words, saying:”* (1, 20-21)

In other instances, the conative function of learning takes the proper form of the proverb, defined according to all criteria of form and content that we apply today:

*“Strive not against a man without cause, when he hath done thee no evil.”* (3, 30)

Getting by the formal redundancy, meaning by the superfluous retake of the explanation from the second part of the statement, which certifies the popular source of the delivered learning, we can notice its

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1 See the “system's constraints” that E. Goffman talks about, 1973, t. 1, pp. 93-98. The typology of these relations is retaken at length in *Les Rites d'Interaction*, Paris, Minuit, 1974, which is actually older as it represents the French version of the volume *Interaction Ritual*, published by the author as far back as 1967.

*practicality*. The counsel regards an *attitude* and a *conduct*, in other words, a way of life.

What we notice, however, in all this mixture of biblically defining the notion of 'wisdom' is the fact that the anonymous author/s establish from the beginning two defining constituents of the concept of 'wisdom'. Without a doubt, all throughout the Book, wisdom is defined through various formal means and through various content determinations: it is sometimes reduced to a single constituent, a detail-related one, from any of the three above mentioned logical series (for instance, the identification with *abstinence* or with *compassion* or with *acceptance of parental reprimands*); in other cases an allegory is created, which, by the richness of its stylistic means, points to essential and detailed defining traits from all the three logical spheres, equally (as in 1, 20-33; 3, 13-18; 8, 20-36, so on and so forth)<sup>2</sup>. For other occurrences of the *wisdom/prudence* pair, as in 9, 10; 16, 16; 17, 27 (*saints/have apprehended*).

*“Blessed is the man that findeth wisdom, and is rich in prudence:*

*The purchasing thereof is better than the merchandise of silver, and her fruit than the chief and purest gold:”* (3, 14-15)

*“Her ways are beautiful ways, and all her paths are peaceable.*

*She is a tree of life to them that lay hold on her: and he that shall retain her is blessed.”* (3, 17-18)

Beyond a new dimension that we discover in this practical image, respectively *wisdom = happiness*, underlined by the first and last word of the cited text, we notice the doubling of the idea of *wisdom* from the first verse with that of *prudence* (3, 13). This association of terms is not the only one in the contents of the *Proverbs*, on the contrary, the two terms are part of a statement with numerous occurrences along the nearly one thousand verses of the *Parables*:

*A wise man shall hear, and shall be wiser: and he that understandeth shall possess governments.* (1, 5)

*The beginning of wisdom, get wisdom, and with all thy possession purchase prudence.* (4, 7)

*Say to wisdom: Thou art my sister: and call prudence thy friend,* (7, 4)

*Doth not wisdom cry aloud, and prudence put forth her voice?* (8, 1)

*Get wisdom, because it is better than gold: and purchase prudence, for it is more precious than silver.* (16, 16) so on and so forth (our underlining).

Determinately, the two terms make up a whole, but do not overlap<sup>3</sup>. While most of the cited verses merely draw our attention to the fact that there are, indeed, two dimensions of learning, without clarifying the characteristics of each dimension, the verse 1,5 clarifies things unanswerably:

*The wise man – science x the prudent man – possessing governments.* Therefore, the teaching of the proverbs points to the cognitive dimension doubled by the conative, applied dimension of the human being. Can this mean that the emotional dimension is missing altogether? Not in the least, for, in the various retakings in more or less amplified contexts, the respective constituent is stated directly or through parables etc., when it is not scarcely reduced to it, as shown above. Such an exclusion would not even have been conceivable in a text that refers to spiritual knowledge, that exploits affectiveness in the perception and judgement of the world. Apart from the already mentioned arguments, that could, however, be questioned because they do not fall strictly under the duality that is so intensely retaken in the 'teaching' statements, there also are such statements that are built only on two terms.

*The parables of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel,*

*To know wisdom, and instruction:* (1, 1-2, our stressing)

*...get wisdom, and with all thy possession purchase prudence.* (4, 7)

On the other hand, the emotional dimension is included in the semantic content of the key-terms that define the dual nature of teaching from the biblical proverbs. By comparing these terms with the ones of the older versions, the above cited verses disclose their content more clearly.

In the Septuagint LXX, the relationship *wise man-science* from the Bible 13, 1, 5, a signified-signifier relationship, by exploiting a *figura etymologica* 13, 1, 5: 'the wise man shall become wiser', and the relationship *prudent-prudence (conduct)* expresses indeed the idea of agent-action:

2 It is worth citing, in this respect, the series of comparisons – quite frequent in the biblical text – from the allegorical image which is presented in chap. 3, verses 13-18.

3 However, the fact that the former constitutes the abstract dimension of the second, which complements it by its practical virtualities, makes them possibly equivalent, for in 13, 16, 21 we can read: *“He who hath wisdom hath prudence...”*

*'the wise one shall acquire the art of ruling'* (our translation)

In the other verses, the relation between wisdom and prudence, established in the Bible, is kept in the exact terms of 'quality' towards 'action'. Likewise, 13, 4, 7 is missing the Greek text (the Alexandrines have omitted it entirely)<sup>4</sup>, but the modern editions completes it, starting with the MT: 13, 4, 7-8:

*"Acquire wisdom with everything you've got/surround it and it will lift you up"* (our translation)

[The Greek text is missing here, so we deal with one of Septuagint's omissions]

On the other hand, the interpreters of *Vulgata*, starting with Hieronimus, have found two terms that would express as accurately as possible the entire significance of the notions by which the anonymous author of the old Greek has defined the idea of 'learned man', 'enlightened man, in spirit and in action':

13, 4, 7: *Pricipium sapientiae: posside sapientiam et in omni possessione tua acquire prudentiam.*

13, 7, 4: *Dic sapientiae: "Soror mea es" et prudentiam voca amicam.*

13, 8, 1: *Numquid non sapientia clamitat, et prudentia dat vocem suam?*

Consequently, the Latin version is much more coherent and more constant in using the terms, probably also because the translator who gave the version that all the others relied on, along the decades, has worked alone, taking up, as we know, only well verified language facts from *Itala* and from what they called *Vulgata*, up until his time, more precisely *Vetus Latina Vulgata*<sup>5</sup>. There are two words that are used everywhere: *sapientia* and *prudentia*. The latter has, however, a substitute in the Latin version as well, *intelligentia* (in the form of *intellegens*, corresponding to *prudens* from the first part of the statement 13, 15). The significances of the Latin terms are not very remote from their Greek correspondents, *phronesis*, *synesis* and *ennoia*.

These ones render the three approximate synonyms for the notion of '*intelligentia*' from Hebrew, that are not so frequently used in the Masoretic text.

The elaborators of the Romanian edition of the *Septuagint* consider that the Greek correspondences are effected 'arbitrarily somehow', falling thus under the large series of translation freedoms towards the original text, that have already been signalled (as in *Septuagint LXX*, p. 397). As far as we are concerned, we feel that the synonymical game in *LXX* merely follows the inconsistencies from the MT. This is, in fact, one of the reasons that the translators from the more recent languages hesitate to using correspondent terms, leaving the impression that they were not very familiar neither with the base language nor with their own languages, as far as the gnoseological vocabulary is concerned. We shall have the opportunity to observe that the Romanian correspondences that we now find confusing were not necessarily due to the 'shortage' of our language (especially for the terminology of the intellect), nor to the precarious training or lack of talent of the interpreters from the last decades' monasteries, but to the extraordinary diversity of the respective terms, that kept coming in different variants in a text also subject to some unexpected laws of semantic and stylistic organization.

How did the other translators solve the problem of expressing the polyvalent content of 'wisdom'?

The *Bucharest Bible* oscillates between translation and linguistic loan, in view of the Romanian "language shortage" from the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

13, 1, 5: *A wise man shall hear, and shall be wiser: and he that understandeth shall possess governments.*

13, 4, 7: *The beginning of wisdom, get wisdom, and with all thy possession purchase prudence.*

13, 7, 4: *Say to wisdom: Thou art my sister: and call prudence thy friend,*

13, 8, 1: *Doth not wisdom cry aloud, and prudence put forth her voice?*

The Romanian version Dumitru Cornilescu, though much clearer than the *Bucharest Bible*, displays the same oscillations between translation and linguistic loan:

13, 1, 5: *That the wise man may hear, and increase in learning; and that the man of understanding may attain unto sound counsels:*

13, 4, 7: *The first thing is wisdom -- get wisdom, And with all thy getting get understanding.*

4 The interpreters do not exclude the possibility that phenomenon might have evolved the other way around: the respective verse might be a supplementary gloss added by the editors of the MT – Masoretic Text ulterior to the Greek translation (as in *LXX*, p. 413, 11-4, 5-7).

5 For the efforts of Hieronimus to offer a considerably better version, according to P. Gh. Barlea, *Introducere în studiul latinei creștine*, București, Grai și Suflet – Cultura Națională, p. 52-54. It is stated however that the *Books of Wisdom*, as well as other books from the OT (*The Ecclesiastes, Baruch, I and II Maccabees*) have been taken without considerable alterations from *Vetus Latina*. For the other parts of the OT and the NT Hebrew texts were used, Greek texts (from the *Septuagint*) and, again, fragments from *Vetus Latina*. According to O. Garcia de la Fuente, 1994, *Latin biblico y latin cristiano*, Madrid: Gredos, pp. 151-52.

13, 8, 1: *Doth not **wisdom** cry aloud, and **prudence** put forth her voice ?*

Finally, in the edition elaborated by Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania, we notice an integration of the terms from two, even three different verses, as the modern scholar knew how to render the final sense of the context rather than the strictly lexical and grammatical succession of words in LXX, compared to those in the Masoretic text<sup>6</sup>.

13, 1, 5: *A **wise man** will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels:*

13, 4, 7: *The beginning of **wisdom** is, Get **wisdom**; and with all thy getting get **intelligence**.*

13, 7, 4: *Say unto **wisdom**, Thou art my sister, and call intelligence thy **kinswoman**:*

13, 8, 1: *Listen as **Wisdom** calls out! Hear as **understanding** raises her voice!*

As we notice, if for the first term the choice was relatively simple, in favour of a constant use of the word wisdom for which 'the only' difficulty resides in the confusion with its hyponym 'prudence', also called 'wisdom', for the second term things are not at all simple. Practically, in each of the four verses, a correspondent of the Latin *prudencia/prudens* is used: *the prudent one, knowledge, ample mind, the work of mind*. It is clear that the interpreter wanted to render the idea and not the word itself. Unfortunately, the idea is no clearer in older texts.

What the interpreter could have stated, after going through these versions, is that *wisdom* is the generic term, which is formed of two components: a) a purely spiritual, theoretical one, also called 'wisdom' – which causes ambiguity and, implicitly, translation difficulties; and b) another, applicative, practical one, quite diffusely defined, but mainly standing for the conative, social value of wisdom.

The authors of the ancient editions themselves have encountered difficulties in naming them, as in LXX and V there are however two or three terms that appear and that do not overlap to the extent of a perfect synonymy. On the other hand, the text juggles with the abstract form of the notion (*wisdom*) and with the one designating the person endowed with the respective quality as abstraction (*the wise one*). Correspondingly, the second term designates both the explanatory value itself (*prudence, sharp mind, etc.*) and the one that applies it concretely (*the prudent one*).

In order to eliminate the first series ambiguities, we used in the above paragraphs the term *teaching* for '*wisdom*', as super ordered notion, and *wisdom*, as abstract, theoretical constituent (with cognitive and, implicitly, emotional value of the term). The equation could, however, be formulated more simply if we were to select from each version the most inspiring term that the translator has chosen. The result is a definition that we dare say it best represents the spirit and the word of the *Proverbs* under analysis:

***Wisdom = science + prudence (in action).***

Can such an equation be accepted? The answer is affirmative, if we accept the old mentality according to which the wise man is a 'good' man, meaning moral, first and foremost. Even nowadays, in popular circles, and not only, 'just and beautiful', 'kind and beautiful' make double pair with 'stupid and ugly', 'mean and ugly'. The remark is confirmed, for the sacred texts, by some of their most competent translators and interpreters, like David-Marc d'Hamonville, and others. The following represents what the elaborators of the Romanian Bible state, following the footsteps of the consistent introductory study of the *Alexandria Bible's* editor:

“...in **Proverbs**, the moral dimension cannot be separated from the intellectual one: the stupid or the crazy one can never be moral, and the evil one, on the other hand, can never be smart. In modern terms, the **Proverbs** suggest a moral gnoseology and a gnoseological ethics; in other words, they suggest a spiritually integrating vision on the human soul, yet untouched by the schizoid virus morality/redemption **versus** intellectuality.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the central idea of the *Proverbs* is that of the opposition between 'the wise/good man (and, implicitly, beautiful)' and 'the stupid/evil man (and, implicitly, ugly)'.

The Romanian versions retake and enlarge upon these synonymical series, all the more so as the base-texts themselves, as shown above, regardless of their origin – Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Slavic, Hungarian, etc. -

6 In *Cuvântul lămuritor (The explanatory word – our translation)*, the author who gave to the Romanian culture the jubilee edition of 2011 shows clearly that “the verse (as well as the chapter) is merely a conventional unit, and not a dogmatic unit in itself; it does not constitute itself in a (sic!) closed universe, on the contrary, it displays multiple windows towards the great universe of the Holy Scripture”, Bartolomeu Anania, p. 12

Consequently, we shall find verses grouped, re-grouped here, in the sense of integration, or, on the contrary, of elaboration, verses that are well confined in all the other Romanian versions or in another language, old or modern.

7 Cristian Bădiliță and Guillaume Bady, *Introduction to the Proverbs*, in LXX, p. 397.

were not excessively consistent. The series of correspondences is endless, the simple forms alternate with the phrases, with the derived forms, etc.: *stupid, crazy, mad* etc. The 'negative' series particularly displays a synonymical richness, according to a general law of the human thought and talk<sup>8</sup>. The modern authors of the Romanian translation of the Septuagint state *expressis verbis* that “they have intentionally opted for the diversity of correspondence”: 'stupid', 'crazy', 'mad'.

The language of moral and of gnoseology imposes such freedoms, as a matter of fact, as we have to deal with a highly generalizing concept. If 'wisdom' means 'knowledge', and if this means 'love of God' in Christian moral, than very different notions overlap, intersect, complement each other and enrich one another's senses, stimulating the corresponding creativity on the lexical level. This is the reason why the Hebrew *da'ath* ('knowledge') is almost systematically assimilated to the Greek *aísthesis*, in *Septuagint LXX*, as the above mentioned interpreters notice. So, if for Plato and his successors this word meant 'sensual knowledge', 'perception by concrete senses', the category opposed to purely intellectual 'judgement', in the theological language – more concrete, but more imaginative – it receives all the possible senses of the notion of knowledge, enclosing the senses of some once opposed terms, like *sophia* 'wisdom' or *phrónesis*<sup>9</sup> 'intelligence', so on and so forth.

In the Romanian texts, the result is devastating. Each translator finds other equivalences for this highly general term, which synthesises the moral and gnoseological essence of the Book under discussion: *knowledge, science, understanding, wisdom, prudence, apprehension* etc.

The Romanian translators of the modern edition of the *Septuagint* (ed. 2004-2006) have once again proved extremely audacious by using the apparent neologism 'discernământ' (discernment/judgement). The word has however the advantage of representing a Latin legacy (according to the Latin *discerno, -ere*), formed with the help of an old suffix for abstractions, *-mânt*, deriving from the same corpus (the Latin *-mentum*) and displaying a vernacular sonority, but a modern use. Unfortunately, such attempts at '**modernizing**' the biblical language, completely rational and necessary in certain cases, as a simple reading of the *Proverbs* proves it, are not accepted by the Orthodox high clergy, the Catholic one, etc., although in many cultures and civilizations of the world the Bible is 'brought up-to-date' linguistically, keeping pace with the believers' personal development.

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8 In his paper dedicated to the antonymical organization of the vocabulary starting with the Indo-European language, all through Latin (classic and late/popular), and from there with the main Romance languages (compared with other modern languages as well – English, German, Russian, Greek), P. Gh. Bârlea shows that, usually, languages display a richer synonymical series at the 'negative' pole than at the 'positive' one of the antonymical relationship. See P. Gh. Bârlea, 1999, p. 52.

9 The two words have as long a history as rich is their semantics, according to D.G.F.