

LOTH Handout for Wednesday evening class on the biblical sages,
Sept. 16, 2026
Class led by Charles Strohmer

Jer. 18:18 >>>

“Come, let’s make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not cease, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let’s attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says.”

See: Jer. 6:13-15; 8:11-12.

The people of God had:
the teaching of the law by the priest
the counsel of the wise
and the word of the prophet

Walter Brueggemann described this triad of authoritative knowledge.

He writes that Jeremiah is calling attention to the fact that each form of knowledge, “has a special substance and a distinct mode in the life of Israel. And a faithful community must attend to all three, not selecting one to the neglect of the others” (1982. *The Creative Word*, cpt 1).

three important Hebrew, OT, words

hkm root for the words “wise” and “wisdom.” And you add vowels to the root word to give it nuances of meaning and to help with pronunciations.

hokma >>> wisdom >>> more than intellectual or academic knowledge; it has a very practical meaning in Scripture that applies to every aspect of life, from individuals, to families, to the public square, to kings and their court officials.

The ancients Greeks >>> *phronesis*, practical wisdom, about having good judgment, being prudent, acting morally (according to their lights) >>> distinct from their word *sophia*, which for them was about theoretical wisdom.

Hokma, however, is not theoretical but about how to live wisely in every

life, and in every aspect of life.

hakam >>> a wise person (man or woman)

hakamim >>> the “*im*” ending makes the plural of the word, i.e., wise men, wise women, or simply the wise. The plural is how you’ll often find it in the OT.

Perdue, Witherington, Boadt, von Rad

The Hebrew scholar Leo Perdue makes this helpful distinction: “Unlike prophets who received the knowledge of God in revelatory states (e.g., standing in the council of Yahweh) or priests whose religious experiences included theophanies..., sages came to their understanding of God and the moral life through ways of knowing that included memory, sense perception, reason, experience, and reflection.” He continues: “[By] using their powers of observation and the ability to think rationally, the sages sought to understand God, social institutions, and the moral life through their reflections on creation and human experience, including their own.”

Wisdom scholar Ben Witherington, [writing about wisdom and experiences that are common to humanity], put it this way [when referencing ancient Israel]: “The sages dealt with and drew deductions from the repeatable patterns and moral order of ordinary life, both human life and the life of the broader natural world. For the most part they were trying to explain how God’s people should live when God is not presently intervening and when there is no late and particular oracle from God to draw on.”

Paulist priest Lawrence Boadt writes that the biblical wisdom literature has “[l]ittle interest in the history of Israel and its specific tradition of revelation: the torah as a body of laws, the covenant, the possession of the land, and [temple rituals]” (*Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*; 1381).

Noted Old Testament theologian Gerhard von Rad writes that the sages has a kind of learned wisdom that he calls “experiential knowledge.” He explains that every old-world culture “devoted itself to the care and literary cultivation of this experiential knowledge.” “No one,” he goes on, “would be able to live even for a single day without incurring appreciable harm if he could not be guided by wide practical experience.”