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James Bergman '19

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**THE DIVINE *SOPHIA*:**  
**THE DEVELOPMENT OF JEWISH AND HELLENISTIC**  
**THOUGHT IN THE CHRISTOLOGY OF**  
**THE NEW TESTAMENT**

**James Bergman**

The tradition of wisdom literature was a prominent theme within the Jewish Old Testament. This emphasis on the idea of wisdom continued into the apocrypha, which detailed the presence of a personified Wisdom that helped God create the heavens and earth. In the New Testament, Jesus is the center of the wisdom literature, becoming the teacher of proverbs and parables in the Gospels and in the letter of James, yet also the personified Wisdom in John. In general, both the wisdom teachings and the Wisdom Christology of the New Testament stemmed from the fundamentals of first century Jewish thought, showing a strong continuity between Judaism of the emerging Christian movement as it is reflected in the writings of the New Testament. The impact of the Israelite and Jewish wisdom tradition has been underappreciated in New Testament scholarship, to its own detriment. As a result, understanding the influence of wisdom literature and first century Judaism on the authors of the New Testament allows a more thorough consideration of the ideology behind the theology that appears in the New Testament theme of wisdom.

**Background of Wisdom Literature**

Two streams of thought in first century Judaism converge in the New Testament, creating an amalgamation of “Palestinian” and Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>1</sup> These two strands, as

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow, *Early Judaism: A Comprehensive Overview* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 221.

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evidenced by the continuing influence of the Old Testament and the apocrypha, greatly influenced the writings of the New Testament in the Epistle of James and the Gospel of John, respectively. The theological and cultural underpinnings behind the development of apocryphal wisdom continued for the writers of the New Testament. Therefore, the lens of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and apocrypha grants greater clarity to a reading of the New Testament.

While it is impossible to establish the common perception of the wisdom literature in first century Judaism, the ideas of the wisdom sayings and personified Wisdom were clearly important to Jewish writers of the era. Greek philosophers of the ancient world gave moral instruction, and the writers of the Old Testament claimed this idea as well.<sup>2</sup> The Israelite wisdom tradition does not focus solely on the cultivation of the intellect, but rather on the practicalities of life. By the time of the apocrypha (200 BCE to 100 CE),<sup>3</sup> both Egyptian and Hellenistic wisdom began to be included with Jewish ideas, forming the basis of Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach.<sup>4</sup> Greek and Egyptian wisdom would likely have been concerned with similar aspects of life to ancient Judaism, so borrowing among the wisdom literature was a prominent phenomenon. The wisdom literature shows a diverse background of Jewish study, combining many kinds of knowledge and appropriating non-Jewish concepts.<sup>5</sup> Even in the most nativist, "Palestinian" circles of Second Temple Judaism, the overwhelming influence of Hellenism would have somewhat inspired their ideas and thoughts.

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<sup>2</sup> Joel B. Green, ed. *The CEB Study Bible with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2013), 108 AP.

<sup>3</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Green, 108 AP.

<sup>5</sup> Terrence Y. Mullins, "Jewish Wisdom Literature in the New Testament" in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 68, no. 4 (1949): 336.

Wisdom in Second Temple texts became a reflection back upon the Torah as it developed in significance during the period. The idea of wisdom evolved to encompass more than pithy proverbs or general life advice. The apocryphal literature, and therefore a branch of first century Judaism, saw Wisdom through observance of the Torah.<sup>6</sup> This tradition of wisdom literature illuminates the continuing importance of Wisdom in Jewish life in the time of the apocrypha, and allowed the Jewish biblical interpreters to take part in a continuing tradition while adapting it.<sup>7</sup> This continued in the New Testament, as the Christian authors incorporated Jewish ideas from throughout the Second Temple Period.

#### **James as the “Proverbs of the New Testament”**

The book of James is often referred to as the “Proverbs of the New Testament” by scholars and biblical commentators. While the format of the book of James suggests an epistolary nature, in content it is *paraenesis*, or ethical instruction.<sup>8</sup> James uses ethical instruction from each era of scripture, including Leviticus, the apocrypha, and the Gospel of Matthew. James seems to have known and used the books of the apocrypha, passing on the tradition of moral wisdom.<sup>9</sup> However, instead of quoting the apocrypha as scripture, he simply incorporates those ideas into his writing. This New Testament work integrates the ideas of first century Judaism, the culture and background of the early church. If the epistle of James was truly written by the brother of Jesus, it follows that Jesus would likely have been intensely familiar with these ideas as well. The apocrypha formed another layer in the religious scholarship of the early Christian communities. Perhaps the

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<sup>6</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 174.

<sup>7</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 175.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Holloway, "James as New Testament Wisdom Literature," *Leaven* 8, no. 2 (2000): 1.

<sup>9</sup> Holloway, 2.

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New Testament could even be viewed as another wave of apocryphal literature, focused on the spiritual realm and a new wave of covenantal theology through Jesus Christ. This line of reasoning would explain the fact that, in general, apocryphal texts were preserved by the Christians, not the Jews.

However, the epistle of James focuses overall on the everyday practice of “wisdom from above” (3:17). James puts forth a call to action (2:14-24), continuing the traditions of the Jewish wisdom literature. He contrasts the arrogant wisdom of the world with the heavenly wisdom that produces the “harvest of righteousness” (3:18), providing a virtue list like those of the Greek moralists.<sup>10</sup> James also appears to paraphrase the Sermon on the Mount, which allows him to preserve and rework the words of Jesus. Overall, James “takes conventional moral wisdom, both Jewish and Greek, and redefines it in light of the incarnation and sure return of Christ.”<sup>11</sup> This also continues and redefines the apocalyptic and covenantal theologies of first century Judaism.

### **Other Wisdom References in the New Testament**

Other parts of the New Testament also deal with the Old Testament concept of Wisdom. The parables of Jesus were a part of the tradition of wisdom teaching. This also shows the mosaic of Middle Eastern thought within first century Judaism, as it is a uniquely Jewish idea with Hellenistic influence.<sup>12</sup> Jesus used wisdom techniques when he taught, acting himself as a sage of the Old Testament wisdom literature.<sup>13</sup> The proverb sayings of Jesus show that the New Testament continues the Old Testament manner of expression, as Jesus personifies

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<sup>10</sup> Holloway, “James as New Testament Wisdom Literature,” 6.

<sup>11</sup> Holloway, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Green, *The CEB Study Bible*, 108 AP.

<sup>13</sup> Mullins, “Jewish Wisdom Literature in the New Testament,” 337.

Wisdom in Luke 7:35 and 11:49.<sup>14</sup> References to Christ's involvement in creation are cloaked in the garb of the wisdom texts of the Old Testament. The first century Jewish perspective and text on the nature of Wisdom became central in defining the identity of Christ in the incipient religion. Jesus himself refers to the divine Wisdom, saying that "Wisdom is proved right by her actions" (Matt 11:19). Jesus eventually is equated Wisdom itself as part of the Christology of the first century.<sup>15</sup> A major foundation for this theology comes from Matthew 23:34, in which Jesus substitutes "I" for the understood idea that Wisdom grants understanding and sends teachers forth. Considering the first century Jewish perspective on Wisdom, this declaration is viewed by some to be as bold as the pardoning of sins by Jesus.

Within Christian text and tradition, Jesus is identified not only with goodness but with wisdom. Jesus is referred to as the Wisdom of God by Paul on numerous occasions (1 Cor 1:24-30, 2:7, 8:6; Col 1:26-27, 2:3, 4:5). Jesus is called the "wisdom of God" in 1 Cor 1:24, and the image of the invisible God in Col 1:15. Thus, the author of John's idea of *logos* was inculcated in the personification of Wisdom as Jesus in Paul.<sup>16</sup> This Greek term contained the Jewish concept of Wisdom. While both the proverb and wisdom sayings of Jesus were contained within the tradition of Jewish wisdom literature, the idea that Jesus is the divine Wisdom was a uniquely Christian development. Likewise, the development of the idea that Jesus, as the divine Wisdom, is the "firstborn" (Col 1:15) of creation draws heavily from both the Wisdom of Proverbs and intertestamental texts; as a result, the apocrypha influenced Paul's perspective on Jesus' divine nature. Jewish culture of the first century held the birthright as a preeminent belief, and

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<sup>14</sup> Mullins, 339.

<sup>15</sup> Mullins, 337.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Boyarin, "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John" in *The Harvard Theological Review* 94, no. 3 (2001): 256.

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this displays itself in the New Testament texts of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Jesus, as the divine Wisdom, is the firstborn of all creation, as she is described in Proverbs 8:22-30 and numerous apocryphal texts. This either informed or reflected the Christological viewpoints concerning Jesus' divinity. Jesus was the firstborn of creation, from God, and this message is evident throughout the New Testament, as in Romans 8:29, which describes Jesus as the firstborn among brethren.<sup>18</sup> The idea that Jesus was a part of creation becomes even more important as the trinitarian theology developed.<sup>19</sup> The Jewish cultural understanding of the firstborn influenced a New Testament theme within the Wisdom literature.

Additionally, the book of Hebrews contains the idea of a personified Wisdom, as it shares a multitude of themes with the ethical and theological facets of the tradition of Wisdom/Sophia.<sup>20</sup> Christ is called "The radiance of God's Glory" (Heb 1:3), like his identification in Col 1:15. This idea draws itself directly from the book of Wisdom of Solomon in the apocrypha, which called Wisdom "a reflection of the eternal light, [an] untarnished mirror of God's active power, and image of his goodness" (Wis 7:26).<sup>21</sup> In the same way, Hebrews continues the covenantal theology of the apocryphal wisdom literature. Jesus is the fulfillment of the old covenant and has surpassed the requirements of the Torah (4:14-16), the focus of first century Judaism.

### **The Prologue of John: *Logos***

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man: a Study of the Idea of Pre-existence in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Hamerton-Kelly, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Hamerton-Kelly, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Ann Beavis and HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Hebrews (Wisdom Commentary Series)* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 2015), 10.

<sup>21</sup> Beavis and Kim-Cragg, *Hebrews*, 12.

Since the inchoate stages of Christianity, a connection between Jesus and the personified Wisdom of the Old Testament was manifest. This is evidenced by the fact that some of the early church fathers, such as Philo of Alexandria, viewed Jesus as the Old Testament figure of Wisdom.<sup>22</sup> The prologue of John can likewise be viewed as continuing the tradition of wisdom literature in the Old Testament and apocrypha, perhaps a Jewish work that became central to the Christology of Christianity.<sup>23</sup> Ostensibly, the idea of *logos* is an abstract concept displaying the separation of Christianity from Judaism at an early stage of the eventual parting of the ways. Many scholars claim that this Hellenistic idea of Christianity is far removed from the Palestinian Judaism of the time.<sup>24</sup> As seen in the apocrypha, this perceived separation is unsubstantiated by the texts of the late Second Temple Jews. In the first century, Judaism and Hellenism (and therefore Christianity) were closely tied.<sup>25</sup> This narrative began to shift only with the developments of Rabbinic Judaism as a nativist reaction.<sup>26</sup> Regardless, it seems that many Christian communities wished to be identified with Judaism.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the Johannine idea of the *logos* is a Jewish one, given new meaning within the Christology of the era.

There are several similarities between *logos* in the Prologue of John and the personified Wisdom of the Jewish scriptures. There was a close connection of the Prologue with certain themes of early and later Jewish Wisdom literature in such biblical and apocryphal texts as Proverbs 8:22-31, Sirach 24, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Baruch 3:37-4:1. This line of reasoning shows that John belongs in the same genre, with

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<sup>22</sup> Boyarin, "The Gospel of the Memra," 249.

<sup>23</sup> Boyarin, 265.

<sup>24</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 398.

<sup>25</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 397.

<sup>26</sup> Boyarin, "The Gospel of the Memra," 246.

<sup>27</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 402.

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thematic parallels, as well as parallel metaphoric language to the Johannine Prologue.<sup>28</sup> An evolution of these parallels, the idea of the divine *logos* as Wisdom, is found personified in the living Jesus. The idea of the *Logos/Sophia* as the mediator between God's transcendence and imminence was widespread in first century Judaism.<sup>29</sup> It is a natural evolution of this Middle Platonic theory that the Son of God assumed the role of the divine Wisdom from the Old Testament and apocrypha- the idea of the *logos* has its roots in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament- to allow a theology that creates a transcendent yet imminent God.<sup>30</sup> The idea of mediators between heaven and earth became increasingly discussed in first century Judaism.<sup>31</sup> The emphasis on angels and other heavenly beings came to the forefront of Second Temple Jewish theology, and the ideas of *Sophia*, *Logos*, and the incarnate Jesus are all aspects of this doctrinal development.

The observance of the Torah was similarly a central theme to the common Judaism of the first century, which underwent a fundamental shift through the New Testament texts, specifically John. Second Temple Judaism saw Wisdom as the representation of a shift toward the renewed importance on the Torah, as evidenced by numerous apocryphal and pseudepigraphal works.<sup>32</sup> In Sirach 24, Wisdom finds a home in Israel because the Torah is being followed. However, in *1 Enoch* and *2 Esdras*, Wisdom is driven back to heaven because of the unrighteousness of Israel. The wisdom literature of the New Testament was aimed at addressing this concern among the early Christians.<sup>33</sup> A new set of explanations emerged among the

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<sup>28</sup> Boyarin, 262.

<sup>29</sup> Boyarin, 248.

<sup>30</sup> Boyarin, 255.

<sup>31</sup> Green, *The CEB Study Bible*, 109 AP.

<sup>32</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 174.

<sup>33</sup> Mullins, "Jewish Wisdom Literature in the New Testament," 338.

early Christian writers and communities to explain the transformation of theology in Christianity. The Epistle of James writes in this same tradition of wisdom literature to show that the Torah has shifted to the new set of instructions from Jesus, centered on living a faithful life.<sup>34</sup> While God's election of Israel, and therefore Israel's obedience to the Torah, are central aspects of Second Temple Judaism, James changed the narrative to focus on the obedience of faith in Christ.<sup>35</sup> In the prologue of John, this notion is further intensified. Here, Jesus becomes the divine Wisdom, and therefore the Torah, which had been the center of Jewish life. As a result, Wisdom literature was used as a focal point for the covenantal shift from early Second Temple Judaism, to first century Judaism, to Christianity. Christian messianism collided with Jewish monotheism when Jesus began to be identified with the personified *Logos*.

This emphasis on following the Torah implicitly continued a debate of what it meant to be Jewish. It seems that the "common Judaism" of the first century was focused on following the Torah and attempted to follow its *mitzvot*.<sup>36</sup> Because of the creation of the Jewish diaspora, each community differed in its understanding of how best to observe the Torah, based on geographical location, socio-economic status of the Jews in the area, and religious requirements from civic leaders. This became necessary because Jews wanted to participate in the Hellenistic culture around them while maintaining a distinct Jewish identity.<sup>37</sup> The fact that these works would prominently feature non-Greek ideas perhaps illuminates the continuing struggle for identity for Second Temple Jews. Most Jewish works written in Greek emphasized the superiority of Judaism

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<sup>34</sup> Holloway, "James as New Testament Wisdom Literature," 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 370.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

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over Greek culture.<sup>38</sup> As an example of a Jewish work, John recognizes major marks of Jewish identity, in the Torah, Temple, Sabbath, and Festivals, but fulfills and replaces these with Jesus.

This understanding of the relationship between Jewish and Gentile culture differed in other parts of the New Testament, in which the historical continuity between Israel and the Christian movement is emphasized in Acts and the Gospels. The apostles are the new leaders of Israel, but God still uses the Jewish people, even as participation in Christianity is no longer limited to those who are Jews by birth but open to “anyone in every nation who fears him and does what is right” by “believing in Jesus and receiving forgiveness of sins through his name.” (Acts 10:34, 43). As a result, Gentiles do not have to convert to the “nation” of the Jewish people by following their customs.<sup>39</sup> The exemption of Gentiles from circumcision does not mean the dismissal of the Torah, but the fulfillment of its true, prophetic intention. However, the Jewish notion of covenant election was radically spiritualized when Gentiles were welcomed in without having to be circumcised, changing the understanding of the continuity between these groups.

### **Conclusion**

The New Testament theme of Wisdom, along with the idea that Jesus is the personification of the divine *Sophia*, lends credence to the idea that the early Christians did not view themselves as distinct from other first century Jews, but rather a development upon the ideals of the Second Temple period. Examining all these facets of Second Temple Judaism presents a clearer picture of the way in which wisdom literature was incorporated into the canon and message of the New Testament. The idea of Jesus as a teacher of Proverbs and parables

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<sup>38</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 237.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.

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was a direct development from the Jewish emphasis on such forms of thought in the first century. Moreover, the identification of Jesus as the divine *logos* stems from both an Old Testament and apocryphal understanding of the interactions between God and mankind. As is evident from the wisdom literature of the New Testament, both normative Judaism and reflection upon the idea of Wisdom in Jewish circles interacted to create the theology of Christianity. Overall, this understanding reveals the level to which Christians built their Christology from the ideas of their Jewish predecessors, while incorporating their own Hellenistic understanding.

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