

ESSAY
BA course year 2 no. 4
"WISDOM"

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom". What was distinctive about Hebrew wisdom as compared with other ancient Near Eastern sources? How did this wisdom develop from Proverbs and Ecclesiastes through to Wisdom and Ben Sirach?

INDEX

1. Preface	3
2. General information on wisdom in Israel	3
<i>a. The term “wisdom” in Israel</i>	3
<i>b. The beginning of traditions of wisdom and schools of wisdom</i>	4
<i>c. The principles of wisdom</i>	4
<i>d. Wisdom as a common-oriental phenomenon</i>	4
<i>e. The seat of life in wisdom</i>	5
3. The genres of wisdom-literature	5
<i>a. Types of speech of the Proverbs-wisdom</i> <i>(German: “Redeformen der Spruchweisheit”)</i>	6
i. The word of statement	6
ii. The word of picture	7
iii. The reminding word	7
<i>b. Other genres of wisdom-literature</i>	7
i. The wisdom speech or the wisdom-poem	8
ii. The prose-genres	8
iii. The list-sciences (German: Die Listenwissenschaft)	8
4. The books of wisdom on a closer view	9
<i>a. The Proverbs</i>	9
i. The structure of the book	9
ii. The time of composition	9
iii. Influences from outside of Israel	11
<i>(a) The book of wisdom of Amenemophis</i>	11
<i>(b) Influences by the „teaching“ and</i> <i>“instructions” as well as by Ugarit</i>	11
<i>(c) The personification of wisdom and the</i> <i>Egyptian goddess “Maat”</i>	11
iv. Intention	12
<i>(a) Both old collections</i>	12
<i>(b) Prologue and epilogue</i>	12

v. The history of effects of the Proverbs	12	
b. Job		12
i. The origin and creation of the book of Job	12	
ii. Time of creation	12	
iii. The style of the book of Job	13	
iv. The intention	13	
(a) <i>The classical “Doing-Feeling-connection”</i>		
(German: “Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang”)	13	
(b) <i>The attitude of Job</i>	13	
(c) <i>The answer of God</i>	13	
(d) <i>Résumé</i>	14	
c. Ben Sirach		14
i. The theological intention	14	
ii. New points of view in the teaching of Ben Sirach	14	
(1) <i>The identification of wisdom and law</i>	14	
(2) <i>The view of the history of salvation</i>	15	
d. Book of Wisdom		15
i. Tradition and new horizons	15	
ii. Teaching of retaliation	15	
iii. The part of the wisdom	15	
5. Bibliography		16

1. Preface

Please notice that the whole essay is based on German literature (mainly on books and notes from the universities of Freiburg and Heidelberg / Mannheim). So it might happen that I use abbreviations, which are only used in German theology (e.g. (Kön) for “Könige” = Kings), or I used German vocabulary, of which I wasn't sure, how to translate them in the right way. In most cases I've tried to translate it into English.

2. General information on wisdom in Israel

Five books of the Old Testament are called “wisdom books”. They are the books Job, Qoheleth, Proverbs and the deutero-canonic scriptures of Ben Sirach and Wisdom. Usually the Song of Songs is added to them, as it's origin is traditionally from Solomon. But strictly speaking it doesn't belong to the books of wisdom.

If you don't reduce the term wisdom-literature to the original books of wisdom, a couple of other scriptures of the Old Testament can be counted to them. Some psalms, prophetic expressions and even parts of the books Tobit and Baruch do belong to this flow of wisdom. Not to get a false idea of the books of wisdom, we have to awaken to meaning of “wisdom” in Israel.

a. The term “wisdom” in Israel

“Wisdom” doesn't first of all mean the capability to answer theoretic-fundamental questions. First and foremost wisdom is the capability to find your way in your daily life, and this simply means the capability getting along with things and people.

In this way wisdom is

- the expert of a craftsman or an artist (Ex 31,3ff; 35,10. 25?26. 35; Jes 40,20 etc.),
- the mind of a regent or a judge (1 Kings 3; Jes 11,2ff)
- or simply the cleverness of life (Proverbs 6,6).

In short wisdom is practical knowledge.

This practical knowledge is based on

- the observation of life-processes
- assignment of comparable facts
- and the cognition of rules.

Out of such observations and assignments they got insights into the given order – which is the order of the nature and the order of inter-human relations.

This insights have now been expressed in a language full of pictures and mainly structured in parallelism. In this way they've been easier to remember and more specific to apply.

b. The beginning of traditions of wisdom and schools of wisdom

Such sentences, in which knowledge has been reflected, have been collected and this collections have been passed on: a tradition developed. ¹

In the course of time such traditions win more and more authority (Job 8,8). In the end even whole schools of wisdom are busy with the collected knowledge of the ancestors. This circles of scholars looked after the old principles of wisdom.

c. The principles of wisdom

The principles of wisdom can be described with the goal

- to keep away danger and damage from life
- and to show a way to a right, respected and successful life (Proverbs 13,14; 15,24)

d. Wisdom as a common-oriental phenomenon

The books of the Israelite wisdom-literature are mainly found in the Hebrew bible under the **כתובים** ["ketubim"], the "remaining scriptures", the youngest part of the Old Testament-canon (German: "alttestamentlicher Kanon").

That's why it's supposed that wisdom is a kind of late phenomenon in Israel.

But actually it is not Israelite-specific, but common for the Near East (German: "gemeinorientalisch").

So there do exist a

- Babylonian (German: "babylonisch")
- or a Canaanite (German: "kanaanäisch") wisdom.
- In Israel the wisdom of the nomadic "sons of the East" is famous.²

In this context it is interesting that the OT itself mentions in its verse-collections foreign authors.³

Above all Egypt seems to have influenced the Israelite wisdom.⁴

¹ See: 1 Samuel 24,14: „As the old proverb says...”

² See: 1 Kings 5,10-11; Job 1,3 etc.

³ See: Proverbs 30,1; 31,1; even Job 1,1

But such relations show that wisdom isn't only known by the post-exilic (German: "nachexilisch") Israel.

An indication of this is the fact of reporting on the wisdom of Solomon a couple of times (1 Kings 3; 5,9ff) although he is known as the original author of the wisdom books.

This seems to base on the memory that single verses or even smaller collections reach back to the early kingship-time (German: "Königszeit").

Even the prophets assume the wisdom again and again and refer positively⁵ or even critically⁶ to them.

e. The seat of life in wisdom

An important indication on the seat of life of the Israelite wisdom is found in Proverbs 25,1. There it is said that the men of Hiskijas, the king of Judah, have arranged the following verses.

Therefore wisdom was cultivated at the **royal house**.

Of course the king needed a couple of wise advisers (2 Sam 16,23; Gen 41,33). It is safe to assume that there has been a real kind of school for officials in Jerusalem.

But this doesn't actually seem to be the original "seat in life" of wisdom. Probably we can simply find it in the **family**.

Above all education was held in the family. The wisdoms of life might have first of all been transmitted here.⁷

So it might be that the courtly wise men have later only "collected" the already given and by this way older good (see: Proverbs 25,1).

3. The genres of wisdom-literature

The oldest and simplest form of wisdom-literature is the verse of wisdom (German: "Weisheitsspruch"), the מִשְׁלָּל ["maschal"]⁸. Almost all genres of wisdom-literature developed from this form.

⁴ The sentences of Proverbs 22,17-23,11 seem to be borrowed more or less literally of the Egyptian book of wisdom of Amenemope / see: Werner H. Schmidt, "Einführung in das Alte Testament"

⁵ See: Am 6,12; Jes 1,2-3; 11,2; 28,23ff.

⁶ See: Jes 5,21; 29,14; 44,25; Jer 8,9 etc.

⁷ See: Proverbs 1,8; 4,1ff; 6,20; 31,26; even Ex 12,26; 13,14 etc. and Proverbs 10,1; 20,20; etc.

⁸ *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, Georg Fohrer (Heidelberg 12. Auflage 1979)

a. Types of speech of the Proverbs-wisdom (German: “Redeformen der Spruchweisheit”)

The wisdom-verse are found in different types.

i. The word of statement

First of all we have to look at the simple word of statement (German: “Sentenz”) or proverb of truth (German: “Wahrheitsspruch”).

In such expressions simply the life is recorded in the way it is. In the Proverbs there are many examples for such expressions. The following is about the acting:

“No good, no good!” says the buyer, but he goes off congratulating himself.” (Proverbs 20,14)

... that is to say that he has made a good deal.

It’s usual to phrase a Doing-Feeling-connection in these words, which is typical for wisdom. The fate is described in this as the result of your own behaviour. The following famous proverb belongs here:

“Whoever digs a pit falls into it, the stone comes back on him that rolls it.” (Proverbs 26,27)⁹

Usually such proverbs are connected with an assessment. At the same time the judgement is expressed simply through words of contrast.

- The wise man and the fool,
- the honest and the wicked,
- poor and rich,
- diligent and lazy

are “confronted” each other.

Behind this there’s the idea that the behaviour of people does come from a basic attitude. But this attitude is finally that one, which “rules” on the future of the people.

“The hope of the upright is joy, the expectations of the wicked come to nothing.” (Proverbs 10,28)¹⁰

Here we see obviously that wisdom loves a kind of “monochrome-painting” (German: Schwarz-Weiß-Malerei). This is connected with its pedagogical line. Such a proverb shall certainly admonish to a right way of living or rather warn against an imprudent way of living.

⁹ Compare: 1 Sam 24,14; Proverbs 11,2 ; 17; 25; 22,8 - 9

¹⁰ Compare: Proverbs 11,7; 23 etc.

ii. The word of picture

Other proverbs do exist as words of picture or words of comparison. Such proverbs are signed by the word “like” or “as”.

Events of different areas, often of the world of nature and the world of man, are here assigned to each other.

It tends to find the comparison at the end of the proverb, which gets a kind of suspense into it. We find numerous examples for it on the Book of Proverbs, e.g.:

“The door turns on its hinges, the idler on his bed.” (Proverbs 26,14)

or:

“As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool reverts to his folly.” (Proverbs 26,11)¹¹

A couple of such words of picture are not exactly determinable. Their content is often ambiguous, even “mysterious”. I think it’s not in this way by sheer chance, but a deliberate method of expression of the wisdom, which isn’t always revealed to man in all details.¹²

iii. The reminding word

All the above mentioned types of speech only want to help to cope with your own life. They don’t only aim to the everyday life. Additionally it’s even to the ethic (Proverbs 19,1; 22) and theological area (Psalms 118,8-9).

Only the reminding word does call you to behave in a certain way. A couple of times an explanation is with “for” “then” added or you’ll find an additional warning.

One example for this reminder is Proverbs 24,19-20. With regard to the “Doing-Feeling-connection” there’s a reminder to keep level-headedness in the face of the evil:

“Do not be indignant about the wicked, do not be envious of the evil, for there is no future for the evil, the lamp of the wicked will go out.” (Proverbs 24,19-20).¹³

This style of speech – the reminding word – is found accumulated in that part of the Book of Proverbs, which are influenced by Egyptian collections (Proverbs 22,17ff.; Proverbs 1,8ff.).

From here it might have worked its way through to numerous parts of Israelite literature. Finally even in the message of the prophets.

b. Other genres of wisdom-literature

Out of the forms of speech of the proverbs-wisdom developed nearly all other genres of wisdom-literature.

¹¹ Compare: Proverbs 25,3; 11 ff.; 26; 28

¹² concerning the „mysterious“ contents and the “riddles” compare: 1 Kings 10,1; Proverbs 1,6; Judges 14,12ff.

i. The wisdom speech or the wisdom-poem¹⁴

A direct development of the “Maschal” is the wisdom speech. Simply it’s nothing more than an extensive verse. In the course of time the verses got polished and more complex. They developed to real speeches.

Such wisdom-speeches are mostly metric composed. Then they are called wisdom- or teaching-poems.

Examples for wisdom- or teaching-poems are reflected in the book of Job. They are a direct further development of the “Maschal”.

This development can be seen very clearly, if you read Job 20,4 – 29. This poem on the fate of the sinner shows clearly the development of the poem by the stringing together of single verses or groups of verses. So there’s a nonuniform general impression.

Job 18,5 – 21 shows a poem, which has got the same topic. But there you find already a closed composition. It’s one example for a fully developed wisdom- or teaching-poem.

iii. The list-sciences (German: Die Listenwissenschaft)¹⁵

Finally I have to mention the list-science of the educational wisdom, which Israel certainly knew as well.

Wisdom did contain even the stock-taking of observed facts in nature and history. From Egypt lots of long lists survived, which name everything, sorted from the biggest to the smallest, what was known in the world.

From Israel such lists didn’t survive, but we find an echo on this list-sciences in lots of parts of the Bible.

A kind of echo can be found for example in 1 Kings 5,12 – 13:

“He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He could discourse on plants from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop growing on the wall; and he could discourse on animals and birds and reptiles and fish.” (1 Kings 5, 12-13)

Even in the description of the creation in Genesis 1 the author falls back on lists.

Also important here is Psalm 104 and 148, where psalms have been composed after such old lists.

Here we see, that the genres of wisdom-literature haven’t only been restricted to the books of wisdom in a narrower sense, they have influenced lots of other books of the OT.

¹³ Compare: Psalm 37,1-2

¹⁴ Compare: Georg Fohrer, Einleitung in das Alte Testament (Heidelberg 12. Auflage 1979) 341-342

¹⁵ Compare: Georg Fohrer, Einleitung in das Alte Testament (Heidelberg 12. Auflage 1979) 343; Annemarie Ohler, Grundwissen Altes Testament (Stuttgart 1988) III/114

4. The books of wisdom on a closer view

Now I'd like to look at the books of wisdom in a narrower sense. First of all we have to examine the "Proverbs"¹⁶. It might be the most typical work of Israelite wisdom-literature.

a. The Proverbs

i. The structure of the book

Looking at this book you notice very fast that the order of the traditional proverbs seem to be irrelevant. Yes even the order of the single paragraphs don't seem to follow a special kind of plan.

This expression is supported, if you notice that the Greek translations of the Bible do have a totally different order of the single paragraphs (the German Herder-Bible and the German "Einheitsübersetzung" are basis of this analysis).

Therefore the book is a collection of collections.

Only Proverbs 1 – 9 and Proverbs 31,10 – 31 adopt the functionality of a prologue and an epilogue.

ii. The time of composition

The structure of the book shows us a long time of growing.

The oldest parts are for sure found in both enormous collections Proverbs 10 – 22,16 and Proverbs 25 – 29. They are attributed to Solomon¹⁶, who
"*... composed three thousand proverbs...*" (1 Kings 5,12).

It is even possible that one part of the proverbs dates back to the early kingship-time.

Additionally the message, that "people of Hiskija" (German word!) had collected proverbs, might show a historic memory. Such proverbs, which have been collected around 700 BC, might be correspondingly older and have their roots in the early kingship-time.

So the old core of this book can be probably fixed in the pre-exilic time.

The other parts have been added bit by bit.

The prologue in Proverbs 1 – 9 might be the youngest part of the book. It contains obvious contacts with the other post-exilic scriptures, so that we might date it in the 5th century BC.

iii. Influences from outside of Israel

Very interesting is the comment on words of Agur and Lemuel (Proverbs 30,1 – 31,9). As here are two Arabic wise men mentioned as the authors of parts of the Proverbs. Now it could be that this two names could have been made up by somebody, but they are

¹⁶ This is where the name of the whole book results from; it is titled as the collection of "the proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel" (Proverbs 1,1) – compare: Alfons Deissler, Anton Vögtle (Hrsg.), Neue Jerusalem Bibel (Freiburg / Basel / Wien 1985) 861)

nevertheless an evidence that Israel was aware of his wisdom being influenced even from outside of Israel.

(a) The book of wisdom of Amenemophis

An obvious proof for such influences are the „words of wise men“ in Proverbs 22,17 – 23,11. They are more or less a word-to-word adoption of the Egyptian wisdom-book of Amenemophis, which was written at the beginning of the first millennium BC.

But besides the correspondence there are some parts in this paragraphs, which might be traced back to Israelite theologians.

So this seems to be an example of how the theologians in Israel revised foreign wisdom-proverbs.

(b) Influences by the „teaching“ and „instructions“ as well as by Ugarit (German word!)

The speeches of Proverbs 1 – 9 are composed by the model of the “teachings” and the “instructions”. These “teachings” and “instructions” have been on of the main-genres fo the Egyptian wisdom-literature.

But even influences of the so called “good advices of a father for his son” can be seen, which have been found a couple of years ago in an Akkadian (German: “akkadisch”) text in Ugarit (German word!).

(c) The personification of wisdom and the Egyptian goddess “Maat” (German word!)

Even the personification of the wisdom, which can be found in Proverbs 1 – 9, has got literary predecessors in Egypt. “Maat”, the main term of the Egyptian teaching of wisdom, which means something like law and rightness, was there personified as goddess.

So we can say that the todays book of Proverbs is the specific Israelite-Jewish draft of the old-oriental wisdom.

iv. Intention

The book of Proverbs contains the wisdom-like thinking of a couple of centuries.

(a) Both old collections

In both old collections (Proverbs 10-22,16; 25-29) the profane, human wisdom is dominant. They are about simply everyday life. Only one seventh of this proverbs has got religious character.

And even this old religious proverbs show a really simple and practical theology, which can be explained by “Doing-Feeling-connection” (German: “Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang”), so what you’ll sow, you’ll harvest.

So God rewards:

- the truth
- the charity
- and the modesty.

And certainly he punishes all opposite vices. It is Jahwe alone, you have to trust (Proverbs 20,22; 29,25).

As origin and summary of all virtues even this old collections name the wisdom. It's a fruit of Jahwe (Proverbs 15,16. 33; 16,6; 22,4).

(b) Prologue and epilogue

The first part encloses the following subjects:

- adultery
- and the relations with an other woman (Proverbs 2,16-17; 5,2-3. 15-16).

Especially the epilogue shows a very high respect for a woman.

v. The history of effects of the Proverbs

The history of effects of the Proverbs and its wisdom of life shouldn't be seen too minor. In the NT the book is quoted 14-times. And about twenty allusions to this collection of proverbs can be located in the NT.

b. Job

The next step of development within the scope of wisdom-literature is the book of Job.

The Proverbs did explain things mainly with the "Doing-Feeling-connection" (German: "Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang")

i. The origin and creation of the book of Job

Today's book of Job seems to have roots, which reach on the one side in a very early time, on the other side also into the region outside of Israel.

Job belongs to the "Sons of the East" (Job 1,3; compare: 1 Kings 5,10). He comes from the "country of Uz", which will be found in the South Eastern, in the area of Edom (Lamentations 4,21). Also the friends of Job are foreigners.

Eliphaz of Teman, Bildad of Schuach and Zophar of Naama (all German words!).

This all seem to be indications of the fact that the book of Job is originally influenced by non-Israelite traditions.

But it still seems to be composed in Israel in all its entirety. Huge indications are the theology and the whole world of ideas of the description.

ii. Time of creation

We have to count at least four phases of development:

- The oral prehistory of the real story of Job (compare Ez 14,14ff),
- the written story of the Job-legend (Job 1-2;42),
- finally the composition of the Job-poetry (Job 3-27; 29-31; 38-42,6) which is used as frame by the real story

- and later additions to this poetry (especially Job 28; 32-37).

iii. The style of the book of Job

Already the frame story of the book of Job does contain lots of wisdom-elements (Job 2,10 etc.). But especially in the dialogues wisdom is the predominant tradition.

But in the book of Job it isn't anymore represented in single proverbs. Longer parts of speech are the stylistic way of presentation.

Other form-elements do also become evident.

- Like the elements, which are used in the Israelite legal procedure (Job 13,3ff; 40,8)¹⁷
- or even form-elements, which we otherwise only know from the Psalms.

iv. The intention

After all the author of the book is interested in the suffering honest man.

(a) The classical "Doing-Feeling-connection" (German: "Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang")

For the usual teaching of the earthly retaliation such a case has to be an impossible contradiction. According to this "Doing-Feeling-connection" the human being gets on earth the reward or punishment for his deeds.

But how can an honest man suffer?

Job tries to find an answer.

(b) The attitude of Job

Job opposes with all his power of his innocence this merciless connection of suffering and personal sins.

With a view of the book of Job it's important to notice that Job doesn't deny the earthly retaliation. He's rooted on the "Doing-Feeling-connection".

Accordingly he doesn't demand anything else than he would feel according to his innocence, which means that he demands a good life.

He's angry about the fact that the retaliation according to his deeds is refused.

He suspects that this has to be a test, which sense he doesn't understand.

We find Job in his own tension, which seems to tear him apart. On the one side he's struggling to find this God, who seems to hide. On the other side he can't let his faith go, that this God is good.

(c) The answer of God

¹⁷ Compare: Werner H. Schmidt, Einführung in das Alte Testament (Berlin / New York 4. Auflage 1989)

Actually God doesn't give an answer to Job and doesn't justify himself, he rather reproaches Job and rebukes him (Job 38,2; 40,8).

At the same time he revealed his nature and his plans to him only as far as necessary to keep job silent.

The message of God's answer in the book of Job is simple and moving. The human being can't understand God's plans. He has to keep his faith, even if his reason doesn't find satisfaction.

(d) Résumé

The book of Job doesn't solve the crisis of the "Doing-Feeling-connection". It's still based on this model of explanation. Finally Job gets repaid for his deeds, because of his trust and the passed test he gets richer than before.

To sum it up it can be said: Man gets what he deserves. If something other happens, it's a secret plan, which man can't understand.

c. Ben Sirach

i. The theological intention

The teaching of this book is traditional like its form.

The wisdom, which is preached by Ben Sirach,

- comes from God,
- has got its roots in the godfearing.
- It brings the youth up
- and brings luck.

So it's more about the help for the concrete life.

But there's still an uncertainty in Ben Sirach, when it's about the human destiny and the problem of retaliation. This question is finally unanswered like in Job and Qohelet. Ben Sirach doesn't get beyond the "Doing-Feeling-connection". He believes in the retaliation according to his deeds in this earthly life.

ii. New points of view in the teaching of Ben Sirach

Beyond this there are a couple of new approaches in the work of Jesus Ben Sirach:

(1) The identification of wisdom and law

For example he identifies the wisdom with the preached law of Moses (Sir 24,23-34).

According to him love to wisdom and love to law are the same.

The observance of the law is though a strict execution of the cult (Sir 35,1-10). Strictly speaking he places wisdom, law and service at the temple on one level, yes he actually connects this three traditional “authorities” to one inseparable unit.

(2) The view of the history of salvation

Compared with the earlier wisdom-teacher the view of the history of salvation is new, which can be found in Sir 44,1 – 49,16. Ben Sirach goes through all the great men of the Old Testament, from Henoch (German word!) to Nehemiah.

But it’s noticeable that the whole view on the history by Ben Sirach is again concentrated on the service. He focuses on the honour of the priesthood.

d. Book of Wisdom

i. Tradition and new horizons

Like its predecessors it reminds

- to search for wisdom.
- Because this come from God,
- is therefore received through prayer
- and is source of virtues.
- Only through wisdom the human being can receive all good things.

But the horizon of the author of this book of wisdom is much wider than that of the earlier wisdom-teachers (Wisdom 7,17-21; 8,8).

This is not at last shown by the handling of the questions concerning the “Doing-Felling-connection”.

ii. Teaching of retaliation

The book of Wisdom does find an answer on the question of retaliation according to the deeds of the single human being.

The book say that God has created man to be immortal (Wisdom 2,23). But this immortality isn’t an automatism, it’s more a reward, which the human being gains through wisdom. The wisdom saves the human being finally a place near to God (Wisdom 6,18-19).

In this way everything, which happens on earth, is a preparation for the “other” life. In this other life the sinners will get their punishment, but the honest will live with God (Wisdom 3,9-10).

This answer offers the teaching of the retaliation in the life after death.

iii. The part of the wisdom

Like in the teaching of retaliation the author of the book of Wisdom goes further in the explanation of wisdom.

Traditionally wisdom is a divine quality. It is that wisdom of God, which has already organized the creation and which directs the events of history.

Wisdom could already been personified in the Proverbs before. In the book of Wisdom it appears as

- a pure outflow of the magnificence of the Almighty
- or a reflection of the eternal light
- and as a picture of the divine perfection (Wisdom 7,25-26).

The passage on the nature of wisdom in Wisdon 7,22-8,8 means a step forward in the phrasing and a deepening of the older concepts in the view of wisdom.

It still doesn't look as if the author does go essentially beyond the understanding of the other wisdom-books and the wisdom would look in some cases like an independent nature (hypostasis). Nevertheless here we've got one of the most important passages, which will support or even influence the later Christian speaking of independence like e.g. the Logos as divine person.

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