

# Horizons of mystery and of wisdom in God (Essay of Rhetorical Biblical Analysis on Jb 28)<sup>1</sup>

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The importance of Jb 28 is amply recognized by all the exegetes for its uniqueness and linguistic beauty, those specialized or not in wisdom writings. Many defend it as a text that shares entirely the philological elegance but also the complexity that crosses the whole book of Job.<sup>2</sup> This perception has transformed this chapter into a wide field of analysis and of an intense debate, in itself and within the whole book of Job.<sup>3</sup> Some authors support that Jb 28 constitutes something later to the original redaction of the book; the last insertion irrelevant to the understanding of the main debate, that renders the later speeches of Yhwh unnecessary.<sup>4</sup> In fact it is impossible to elude some incongruous and unusual words or expressions.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This study was presented in The First International Convention of *Biblical and Semitic Rhetoric* held on September 15-18, 2008 in Rome at the Pontifical Gregorian University.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. L. ALONSO SCHÖKEL – J.L. SICRE DIAZ, *Job, Comentario teológico y literario* (Madrid, 1983) 394; G. BORGONOVO, *La notte e il suo sole*, Luce e tenebre nel libro di Giobbe. Analisi simbolica (AnBib 135; Roma, 1995) 61.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. C. KUHL, „Neuere Literarkritik Des Buches Hiob“, *TRev* 21 (1953)164-205.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. E. DHORME, *Le livre de Job* (Paris, 21972) li. ROWLEY, H.H., “The Book of Job and its Meaning”, *BJRL* 41 (1958-1959) 167-234

<sup>5</sup> Cf. R. GORDIS, *Job, The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation and Special Studies* (New York, NY 1978) 537-538 special note 24.

However, it would be a terrible mistake to neglect the beauty and the singularity of style of Jb 28, marked by the finesse and accuracy of its images. In a certain sense, the style signals an unexpected contrast with the argumentative character of the language of Job's friends, producing an extraordinary link with the Yhwh speeches (Jb 38:1–42:6). However, we find allusions to key themes in the preceding dialogues, as the grand exploits of mortals recall earlier mighty deeds of God (28:9; cf. 9:5; 28:11; cf. 11:6; 12:22; 28:3; cf. 11:7; 14:5) and the theme of the inaccessibility of wisdom developed with considerable fervour in Jb 11.<sup>6</sup> In the context of these arguments all the questions placed by modern exegesis become relevant. The focus expands in new directions towards an understanding of the intention of placing such a text in the heart of the book of Job and in the core of its drama. What role does Jb 28 play inside the whole thinking proposed by the book? In what sense does it signify a decisive moment in wisdom thought? I believe that the answer to these questions implies a challenge that requires a methodological reading and an attentive listening; showing the Word of God has to work through words and human images, to be understood in Jb 28 as *horizons of mystery and of wisdom in God*.

Therefore, the focus of this study is to present the composition of Job 28, using the procedures of Rhetorical Biblical Analysis as a concrete way to approach the biblical text using methodological reading and an attentive listening.<sup>7</sup> Recent attempts of classical rhetoric constitute a first step, but the results are not very convincing.<sup>8</sup> For that reason I suggest a study of the composition of Job 28 that will permit an emphasis on the philological richness of the poem. I strongly believe that this study will re-launch a greater understanding of Job 28 in (the context of) the Book of Job, revealing the pertinence of this thought in the singular field of Biblical Wisdom Literature, which is always woven of poetry and enigma.

<sup>6</sup> Unusual expressions such as “wild/proud beasts” (v.8; 41:26) and “thunderstorm” (v.26; 38:25), as well as key terms such as “way”, “place” and “discernment” (38:12.19.20.24.36; 39:26) are found both in this chapter and in the closing speech of Yhwh [cf. N.C. HABEL, *The Book of Job* (London, 1985) 392; J. LINDBLOM, *La composition du Livre de Job*, (Bulletin de la Société Royale des lettres de Lund, 1944-1945, 3; Lund 1945) 79; S. TERRIEN, *Job* (Indianapolis, IN 1957) 23].

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Cf. R. MEYNET, *Rhetorical Analysis*. An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric (JSOTSS 256; Sheffield, 1998); “The Question at the Centre: A Specific Device of Rhetorical Argumentation in Scripture”, *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts*. Essays from the Lund 2000 Conference, Emory Studies in Early Christianity 8 (eds. A. ERIKSSON – T.H. OLBRIGHT, – W. ÜBELACKER) (Harrisburg, PA 2002) 200-214.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A. LO, *Job 28 as Rhetoric*. An Analysis of Job 28 in the Context of Job 22-31 (Leiden, 2003); P. van der Lugt, *Rhetorical Criticism and the Poetry of the Book of Job* (Leiden, 1995).

## The Text<sup>9</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> «Indeed, there is a source for silver  
and a place for the gold they refine.
- <sup>2</sup> From dust iron is extracted  
and from stone copper is poured out.
- <sup>3</sup> He puts an end to darkness,  
and to every limit he explores,  
the stone dark and gloom.
- <sup>4</sup> He breaks into a shaft far from habitation,  
(in places by) forsaken by the foot  
they swing far from human being they sway.
- <sup>5</sup> The earth from it proceeds bread,  
has lower regions convulsed by fire.
- <sup>6</sup> The place of sapphires its rocks,  
and dust-gold too in it.
- <sup>7</sup> A path to it the bird of pray does not know  
and the falcon's eye has not gazed on it.
- <sup>8</sup> Wild beasts have not trodden it,  
nor the lion passed over it.
- <sup>9</sup> He set their hand against flint rock,  
and he overturns the mountains by the roots.
- <sup>10</sup> He cut channels in the rocks  
and their eyes see precious things.
- <sup>11</sup> He dam up deep sources of rivers,  
so a hidden thing is brought to light.
- <sup>12</sup> But wisdom where shall be found?  
and where is the place of understanding?
- <sup>13</sup> Human being does not know the way  
and she is not found in the land of the living.
- <sup>14</sup> The deep says '(She)-is-not-in-me',  
the sea says '(She)-is-not-with-me'
- <sup>15</sup> She cannot be gotten with fine gold,

<sup>9</sup> I retain as an important moment a brief presentation of some philological problems and the translation I consider closer to the Hebrew from BHS.

- and silver cannot be weighed as her price.
- <sup>16</sup> She cannot be bought with the gold of Ophir,  
nor onyx precious, nor sapphire.
- <sup>17</sup> Gold and glass cannot equal her,  
nor vessels of fine gold be exchanged.
- <sup>18</sup> Coral or crystal need not be considered;  
the price of wisdom is above pearls
- <sup>19</sup> Topaz of Ethiopia She cannot equal her,  
she cannot be bought with pure-gold.
- <sup>20</sup> But wisdom from where does she comes?  
and where is the place of understanding?
- <sup>21</sup> She is hidden from the eyes of all living,  
and concealed from the birds of heaven.
- <sup>22</sup> Abaddon and Death say:  
‘With our ears we have heard a hearing of her’.
- <sup>23</sup> But God understands the way to her,  
and he knows her place.
- <sup>24</sup> For he looked the extremities of earth,  
he saw everything under heaven,
- <sup>25</sup> when he made a weight to the wind,  
and meted out to the waters a measure;
- <sup>26</sup> when he made a rule for the rain,  
and a way to the thunder voice.
- <sup>27</sup> Then he saw her and appraised her,  
he established her and he explored her.
- <sup>28</sup> And he said to humankind:  
Behold! The fear of the Lord, that is Wisdom,  
and turn from evil, understanding’

The intriguing initial *kî* (v.1) is a conjunction, normally meaning ‘for, indeed’. Normally, it provides the justification of a foregoing pronouncement, or somehow serves as a link between phrases or passages. Some authors argue that in its present context it does not seem to fulfil its regular duty: it does not link related texts but marks an absolute start; a temporary pause in the swift development of Job’s drama not especially connected

with any particular text but a brusque and abrupt turn in the so far uniform progress of the story, introducing the new turn in the thought. But the hymn is not out of context. We do not have to modify the present context in order to attribute a more conventional role to the vague participle.<sup>10</sup> The noun *mōsā'*, literally, "place of coming forth" is taken by some scholars as to mean "smelter" from an Arabic root "be clean".<sup>11</sup> Since the emphasis of this chapter, however, is not on the processing of ore, but on the mysterious deep origin of precious metal, the basic sense of "source" is more appropriate (cf. 2Kings 2:21, where the noun is used of the source of water). In line with the logic of v.1a, we agree that *māqōm*, "place" here does not refer to the *locus* of the refining process, but of the gold which is subsequently refined.<sup>12</sup> In v.2 instead of the masoretic *yāsûq*, most critics prefer various possible forms of the well-attested verb *yāṣaq*, "to pour".<sup>13</sup> The masoretic form is admittedly rare, but the use of the same verb in Jb 29,6 provides sufficient grounds for claiming an independent root *sûq*, to pour, parallel to *yāṣaq*. The regularly feminine *'eben*, with a masculine ending in the plural, seems to be construed as a masculine (cf. 1Sm 17:40). In v.4 the idiom *mē 'im-gâr*, literally, "from with a dweller," is emended by many scholars. However, the forceful threefold repetition of *min*, "from," in the sense of "away/far from" argues for retaining the text and rendering "*gâr*" as "sojourner," parallel with the "human feet" of travellers in 4b.<sup>14</sup> In v.5b we read with the Vulgate *bemō* for *kemō* thus rendering the expression "by fire" rather than "like fire". In v.8 the expression *benē-šāḥaš*, literally

<sup>10</sup> Some authors provide a convenient context by inserting the Jb 28 after Jb 42,6 when Job has finally learned wisdom and acknowledged God's sovereign and inscrutable providence [cf. P. SZCZYGIEL, *Das Buch Job* (Bonn, 1931) 234-235]; others create a new context by inserting the refrain before v.1, considering the first part of the hymn to be a partial answer to the rhetorical question, aptly introduced by *ki* [cf. A.S. PEAKE, *Job* (London, 1915) 127]. Actually, the tendency is to consider that the relation of the hymn to its context should not be conditioned by the introductory *ki* [cf. F. BROWN - S.R. DRIVER - C.A. BRIGGS, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the OW Testament* (Oxford, 1922) 472; L. KOEHLER - W. BAUMGARTNER, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros* (Leiden 1958) 431; N.C. HABEL, *The Book of Job* (London, 1985) 389].

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. POPE, *Job* (Garden City, 1973); M. DAHOOD, "Northwest Semitic Philology and Job", in *The Bible in Current Catholic Thought* (ed. J. MCKENZIE), (New York, NY 1962) 67.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. S. TERRIEN, *Job* (Neuchatel, 1963) 78.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. E. DHORME, *Le livre de Job* (Paris, 1972) 366.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. R. GORDIS, *The Book of Job: Commentary* (New York, NY 1978) 278. This author reads *gâr* as "crater" on the basis of an Arabic parallel and renders v. 4a "cleaves a channel from the crater." Many follow H. GRAETZ in reading *neh?lîm 'am-g'r* and render the line "alien people cut shafts" [cf. M. POPE, *Job* (Garden City, 1973); E. DHORME, *A Commentary on the Book of Job*, (London, 1967)].

“sons of pride,” is variously interpreted as a mythological term (cf. 41:26), “lion’s whelps”, “proud beasts”, and “wild beasts”. The association with “birds of prey” (v.7) favours the last one. In v.13a it is evident from the LXX that the use of the verb “found” (*mš*), and the repetition of the refrain in v. 23 that *erek*, “price” should be read *derek*, “way”. The question of locating wisdom (vs. 12-14) precedes the consideration of its value (vs. 15ff.). In v.17a *zēkōkīt* derived from *zkk*, “clear” refers to “glass” or “crystal”. In v.18a the meaning of *nā’mōt*, here rendered “coral”, is uncertain (cf. Ezek. 27:16). The word seems to refer to a breast ornament, perhaps a string of coral beads or pearls (cf. Ezek. 13:11.13; 38:22). In v.18b *penînîm* seems to refer to “rubies”, as Lam 4:7 suggests they are red stones. However, many scholars favour rendering “pearls”.<sup>15</sup> The word *mešek* is variously rendered “pouch”, “price, “extraction”. However, the meaning of the verb *mšk* (“draw out”) and its usage in Pr 3 1:10 suggests the idea of “price, value”. In v.23 some translations render the verbs of vv.23-24 as past and some as present. We retain the past tense of the MT and link it with the clear past action of v.27. In 26b *ḥazîz qōlōt* is interpreted as “lightning flash”, “thunderbolt”, “rumble of thunder”. In Zech10:1 the word *ḥazîz* apparently refers to some form of “rain” and *qōlōt* is literally “voices”. However, thunder was often considered the voice of God (cf. Jb 37:4-5). From v.12, the text progresses insisting on the 3<sup>a</sup> fem. sing. The option for the pronoun «she / her» and not «it» appears to be more in keeping Jb 28 with references to wisdom, which is feminine in Hebrew (*ḥokmâ*,) and Greek (*sofia*). However, I am aware that if «she» is used the account reads like a personification text, and as the poetic language of Jb 28 intensifies the depiction beyond simple narrative, it may suggest that the author intended to personify wisdom.<sup>16</sup> This personification finds great consistency in texts such as Pr 1:23 where wisdom speaks and is spoken about (“I will pour out my thoughts to you, I will make my words known to you”); Pr 8:22.35 (“The Lord created me at the beginning... whoever finds me finds life”); Pr 9:5 (“Come eat of my bread”), and we can go on with other texts as Sir 24:1-24; Bar 3:9-4,4; Wis

<sup>15</sup> Cf. S.R. DRIVER – G.B. GRAY, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids, MI 1949) 179.

<sup>16</sup> I share with some scholars [N.C. HABEL, *The Book of Job* (London, 1985) 388-389] the claim that wisdom is personified in Jb 28, while others regard it as a divine attribute, deciding to translate the 3<sup>a</sup>fem.Sing with the English «it» [cf. P.P. ZERAFÀ, *The wisdom of God in the Book of Job* (Roma, 1978) 128-129].

7:25-26. No doubt, we are here dealing with a multifaceted, elusive, immanent, corporeal and tangible figure that takes up residence in biblical tradition and to this day inspires and puzzles theological, religious and scholarly research.<sup>17</sup>

### The Sequence (Jb 28:1-28)

The scholars have no great hesitations about the coherent structural unity of Jb 28:1-28, although some rearrange, delete or add certain lines to construct a balanced pattern which corresponds to a preconceived idea of strophic symmetry. For many this is a futile effort, incapable of dealing with the intricacy and the techniques employed in the construction of this poem. The prevailing metaphor is the search for what is rare and precious, developed in three main motifs: the place or source of the precious item, the way or means of access to that item, and the process of discovering and acquiring the item. In this development some positions are accentuated: the relative capacity of humans to discover the precious; and the inferior value of precious earthly items compared with the priceless worth of wisdom. The poem is characterized by numerous linguistic devices: the ability of mortals to “overturn mountains” (28:9b), evoking God’s power and technical skill; the anthropomorphisms introduced with the description of God “seeing”, “appraising” and “probing” wisdom, in a way which recalls how human beings “probe” the darkest fissure of earth (28:3). Wisdom is presented as more than a pre-existent ideal or entity, through a listing technique to underscore her unsurpassable value (28:15-19). The realities of death, sea and deep appear personified as figures who are ignorant of wisdom’s whereabouts (28:14.22), portraying wisdom possibly as the elusive and alluring woman behind the scenes whom God alone has found (15:8).

Aware of all these features, the following study will present the text of Jb 28 as a sequence composed of three passages (1-11; 12-22; 23-28), each constructed of three parts. Each passage emerges as an important insight

<sup>17</sup> One recent contribution to this research is the study of A.M. SINNOTT, *The Personification of Wisdom* (SOTS monograph series) (Burlington, VT 2005).

on divine and human access to wisdom. The first passage (1-11) focus on the divine design splendidly related to human excellence. This attention is recovered in the third passage (23-28), in the assertion of two different ways to access wisdom: the one of God and the other human. The centre (12-22) opens and closes questioning the place where wisdom is found, disclosing the real heart of the author's inquiry.<sup>18</sup> Among the challenges we face in the process of reading and working with the composition is to discover clearly the inner linguistic and thematic dialogue in between the three passages.

**Divine** design and **human** excellence

«Indeed, *there is* a SOURCE and a PLACE»

«An end *he* puts to darkness... *he* overturn the mountains by the roots» 1-11

Where shall **WISDOM** be found

«*Human being* does not know the way»

«She is hidden from the eyes of *all living*» 12-22

**Divine** and **human** access to **WISDOM**

«*God* understands HER way»

«*Fear of the Lord*, that is wisdom» 23-28

<sup>18</sup> I am aware that the composition I suggest agrees with the traditional tripartite division defended by quite a few scholars. However, for most this division is imposed by the double refrain, normally accepted as authentic clearly dividing the text into three parts [cf. G. Fohrer, *Das Buch Hiob* (Gütersloher, 1963) 122; J. LÉVÊQUE, *Job et son Dieu, Essai d'exégèse et de théologie biblique* (Paris, 1970) 596]. There are also some other scholars who have defended a quadripartite division. These authors do not attach too much importance to the refrain, although they dutifully place it at the beginning of the last two sections (1-8; 9-11; 12-19; 20-27) [cf. E. DHORME, *Le livre de Job* (Paris, 21972) 365-378]. A more popular division places the refrain at the beginning of the last two sections (1-11; 12-19; 20-27,28). According these scholars: "the double refrain, which proclaims man's inability to accede to wisdom, serves as a convenient introduction to the second (15-19: wisdom cannot be acquired at any price) and third stanza (verses 23-27: only God has access to wisdom). The first section (1-11), on the contrary, does not tolerate the refrain. It is an introduction to the core of the poet's message. It describes man's enterprising spirit and wondrous achievements, as opposed to his miserable failure to acquire wisdom. It stands by itself as a prelude to the real poem." [cf. P.P. ZERAFA, *The wisdom of God in the Book of Job* (Roma, 1978) 131-133]. Recently, some works of Rhetorical Criticism have surprisingly recovered the quadripartite division (1-4 (Man forces his way into all secret places); 5-12 (... but fails to find wisdom); 13-20 (wisdom is unattainable for mankind); 21-28 (Only God knows the place of wisdom) [cf. P. van der LUGT, *Rhetorical Criticism and the Poetry of the Book of Job* (Leiden, 1995) 236-237]. Although tending to the tripartite division, the study of the composition that we suggest will show how these divisions disregard so many important aspects, weakening a closer and a more genuine interpretation.



# 1. Divine design and human excellence (Jb 28:1-11)

## Composition

+ <sup>1</sup> «INDEED, there is	for silver	A SOURCE
+ and a PLACE	to the gold	they refine.
+ <sup>2</sup> <b>Iron</b>	from dust	is extracted
+ and from stone	is poured out	<b>copper.</b>
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- <sup>3</sup> An <i>end</i>	<b>he</b> puts	to darkness,
- and to every	<i>limit</i>	<b>he</b> explores
: the stone	dark	and gloom.
- <sup>4</sup> <b>he</b> breaks	into a shaft	far from habitation
: forsaken	(in places by) the foot	
: they swing	far from human being	they sway.
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+ <sup>5</sup> The earth	from it proceeds	bread,
+ has lower regions	convulsed	by fire.
: <sup>6</sup> The PLACE	of sapphires	its <b>rocks,</b>
: and dust	<b>-gold</b>	in it.
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+ <sup>7</sup> A <i>PATH</i> (to it)	does not know	the <i>bird of pray</i>
+ and has not gazed on it	the eye	of the <i>falcon.</i>
: <sup>8</sup> Have not trodden it	<i>wild-beasts,</i>	
: nor passed over it	<i>the lion.</i>	
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+ <sup>9</sup> Against flint rock	<b>he</b> set	their hand,
: and <b>he</b> overturns	by the roots	the mountains.
= <sup>10</sup> In the <b>rocks</b>	<b>he</b> cut	channels,
: and precious things	see	their eyes.
= <sup>11</sup> Deep sources	of rivers	<b>he</b> dam up,
: a hidden thing	is brought	to light.

The passage is composed of three parts: 1-4; 5-8; 9-11. The first (1-4) and the last part (9-11) are focused on human activity and ability to perforate the rock and to reach hidden places never crossed over. The unity of this focus is emphasized by the use of the third masculine singular of all verbs. However, while the first part accentuates the human ability to reach limits (3-4), the third part converges on the great danger mortals face in their quest for rare items at the extremities of earth (9-11). Within these two parts (1-4; 9-11), one exception is the first piece of the first part (1-2), marked with the statement about an appointed place for commodities in the cosmos. This assertion signals not only the beginning of the passage (1-11) as it leads the whole of chap. 28, not directed primarily on the rare nature of things, but on their hidden location in a specified place. The focus on human ability is interrupted, in the central part (5-6). This interruption is visible in the change of subject, no more the human being but the earth's potential. To highlight this, the author repeats the key word «place» (6) relating it with the appointed place the commodities have (1). Earth is described as having deep components that surpass the simple productive features (5-6) and paths concealed most precisely to animals (7-8). There is an evident composition of type ABCB'. Phenomena of the earth have appointed places in the order of things and there is a designated way of access to those phenomena that even the most skilled animals could not reach. The centrality the author attributes to this assertion which is well placed in between his thought about the extraordinary human ability to reach limits, shows how he believes in the role of excellence human beings have.

## Biblical Context

### *Recalling the divine design of the universe*

The idea of an appointed place for silver and gold (1), recalls the divine design of the universe, well attested in the first narrative of creation (*Then God said, "Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear"; and it was so Gn 1,9*). The same perspective is found in Ps 104:8 where we hear about a place for mountains and valleys delineated by God: *The mountains rose; the valleys sank down to the place which you established for them*. Sharing this meaning we have also the book

of Qohelet, mainly when the author speaks about God's design of a circular rhythm for everything (cf. Qo 1:7; 2:24; 3:11; 7:13; 11:5). All these texts impart the conviction that the cosmos is called into existence as having a proper place. However, this is the place that God chooses for them. And although Ps 103:15-16 specifies that human beings share this appointed and proper place, together with all creation (*As for man, his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes, when the wind has passed over it, it is no more, and its place acknowledges it no longer*) they are depicted in Jb 28:3-11 as endowed with an particular ability that marks a difference with the animals, giving them a position of excellence.

*Man's ability is apparently without limit*

The implicit image of miners putting an end to darkness and breaking into a shaft seems to recall the mortals in their attempt to dig into *Sheol*, as they explore the mysteries of earth below (3-4), as is mentioned in Am 9,2 (*Though they dig into Sheol, from there will My hand take them; and though they ascend to heaven, from there will I bring them down and bring them forth to be made public monuments of divine justice.*). Here the author explains the impossibility for human beings to find a place to escape God's justice. The same idea appears in Jb 3:17 when Job recognizes that although the grave could be a hiding-place for the righteous from the malice of the world, it shall be no hiding-place for the righteous from the justice of God. In light of these texts we can conclude that truly humans can reach the farther limit; however there will always be a boundary that only God knows and masters. In mining activity and ability they can penetrate the farther limit (3-4.9-11), but as *Zophar* asks will the human being able to find the mystery of *Eloah* and the limit of *Shadday*? (Jb 11:7).

## 2. A place where to find wisdom (Jb 28:12-22)

### Composition

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+ <sup>12</sup> But <b>WISDOM</b>	where	shall be found?
: and where is	<b>the place</b>	of UNDERSTANDING?
: <sup>13</sup> Does not know	<i>human being</i>	the way
: and she is not found	in the land	of <i>the living</i> .
= <sup>14</sup> <b>The deep</b>	says	'(She)-is-not-in-me',
. and <b>the sea</b>	says	'(She)-is-not-with-me'

+ <sup>15</sup> She cannot be gotten	with fine	gold,
+ and cannot be weighed	silver	as her price.
: <sup>16</sup> She cannot be bought	with the gold	of Ophir,
: nor onyx	precious,	nor sapphire.
= <sup>17</sup> Cannot equal her	gold	and glass
= be exchanged	for vessels	of fine gold.
+ <sup>18</sup> Coral	or crystal	not be considered;
: the price	of <b>WISDOM</b>	is above pearls
= <sup>19</sup> Cannot equal her	the topaz	of Ethiopia,
= with pure-	gold	she cannot be bought.

+ <sup>20</sup> But <b>WISDOM</b>	from where	<b>does she comes?</b>
+ And where is	<b>the place</b>	of UNDERSTANDING?
: <sup>21</sup> She is hidden	from the eyes	of <i>all living</i> ,
: and from the birds	of heaven	concealed.
= <sup>22</sup> <b>Abaddon</b>	and <b>Death</b>	say:
. With our ears	we have heard	a hearing of her.

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The second passage (12-22) is composed of three parts (12-14; 15-19; 20-22). The first (12-14) and third parts (20-22) present a similar composition of a single piece that opens with two parallel initial questions (12.20) where we find the first explicit mention of wisdom and of understanding. Apparently these questions are rhetorical questions, that have no answer or no answer is possibly awaited. They seem to be asking the same question. However, two different verbs seem to signal a complementary difference: the verb *to find* suggests the struggle of finding Wisdom (12a) and the verb *to come* the impenetrability of Wisdom's origin (20a). Like the phenomena that integrate the universe, wisdom is here personified and depicted as having an appointed place where she belongs in her own design of things. In each piece, the following segments (13-14; 21-22) try to point out a specific answer in two different and complementary ways. In the first part (13-14) these verses suggest the fact of the inaccessibility of wisdom and understanding for human beings or any living creature, also reported in the words of the deep and the sea as something not confined to one component or area of the universe, even the deepest one. In the second part (21-22), the inaccessibility of wisdom and understanding is justified as something impossible to be seen by the eyes of anyone living, even the most skilled birds of heaven (21). However, Abaddon and Death as mysterious realities admit the possibility of fine hearing (22). The central piece (15-19) is formed with two segments, both concentrated on the singularity and value of Wisdom. The explicit reference to *wisdom*, used in the first segment of the first and third part (12a.20a), reappears in the second part to portray the singularity of wisdom as something impossible to reach by any normal human means of acquisition (15-19). The whole part (15-19) is overcharged with synonym verbs and references to precious metals. However, the second piece (18-19) specifies the important aspect of wisdom's value. This allusion makes a great difference: the singularity of wisdom is also signed by the inaccessibility of its value. The composition of the passage appears as a type of ABA'. In front of wisdom, all creatures and realities face not only her singularity (A) or her remoteness (A') but the impossibility of its acquisition and the total inaccessibility of her value (C).

## Biblical context

### *Primordial Wisdom*

Wisdom is described as not located in the primordial Deep (cf. Gn 1:2; 7:11; 49:25) or the ancient watery chaos called Sea (cf. Jb 38:16; Ps 89:9-10). In the background of this verse lies the tradition of Pr 8:22-31, where wisdom claims to precede the construction of the cosmos, including the emergence of the deep (cf. Pr 8:24), its primordial organization (cf. Pr 8:28) and the assignment of limits to the sea (cf. Pr 8:29). Wisdom is a reality not only impossible to confine to an area of the universe, but also as something that precedes all creation and she lies beyond it. The allusion that mysterious realities as Abaddon and death as having had heard a hearing from her, suggest a mark of the peculiarity of the author's thought. Abaddon is a relatively common name for *Sheol* in Wisdom literature and means destruction or dissolution (cf. Jb 26:6; 31:12; Pr 15:11; 27:20). Death recalls the Canaanite God Mot, the god of death and king of the underworld (cf. Jb 18:13). Inasmuch as wisdom is a deep and hidden reality, Abaddon and Death might be the only possible source of information about her location since their domain is deep, dark, and mysterious.

### *Acquiring Wisdom*

Wisdom appears as a reality that cannot be acquired in exchange for precious stones, no matter how rare or valuable. The theme of 'acquiring wisdom' is important in sapiential literature. The most frequent examples are located in the book of Proverbs: *Acquire wisdom, acquire understanding, never forget her, never deviate from my words. . . The first principle of wisdom is: acquire wisdom; at the cost of all you have, acquire understanding!* (Pr 4:5.7); *What good is money in the hand of a fool? to acquire wisdom with it? The desire is not there* (Pr 17:16); *The heart of the intelligent acquires learning, the ears of the wise search for knowledge* (Pr 18:15); *Whoever acquires sense wins profit from it, whoever treasures understanding finds happiness* (Pr 19:8); *Acquire truth — never sell it—wisdom, discipline, and discernment* (Pr 23:23). However we may find echoes in Wis 7:14 (*For she is to human beings an inexhaustible treasure, and those who acquire this win God's friendship, commended to him by the gifts of instruction*) and in Sir 38:34 (*Leisure gives the scribe the chance to acquire*

wisdom; a man with few commitments can grow wise). In other texts we find the idea that those who acquire wisdom gain a prize that surpasses silver, gold, or any precious jewel: *Blessed are those who have discovered wisdom, those who have acquired understanding! Gaining her is more rewarding than silver, her yield is more valuable than gold. She is beyond the price of pearls, nothing you could covet is her equal* (Pr 3:13-15); *Better to acquire wisdom than gold, choose understanding in preference to silver* (Pr 16:16). However, we may foresee in Jb 28 a shift in the appropriation of this tradition. The wisdom mentioned here is not only something difficult and mysterious as Qo 7,23 declares (*I tested all this with wisdom, and I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it?*) or more valuable than any precious metals, but these costly materials are worthless for those who acquire wisdom.

### 3. Divine and human access to wisdom (Jb 28:23-28)

#### Composition

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+ <sup>23</sup> But <i>GOD</i>	UNDERSTANDS	her <i>way</i> ,												
+ and <i>he</i>	<i>knows</i>	her place.												
= <sup>24</sup> For ,	the ends of <i>earth</i>	<i>he</i> looked,												
. everything under	<i>heavens</i>	<i>he</i> SAW.												
<table border="0"> <tr> <td>: <sup>25</sup> When <i>he</i> made</td> <td>to the wind</td> <td>a weight</td> </tr> <tr> <td>: and to the water</td> <td>meted out</td> <td>a measure.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>: <sup>26</sup> When <i>he</i> made</td> <td>to the rain</td> <td>a rule,</td> </tr> <tr> <td>: a <i>way</i></td> <td>to the thunder</td> <td>voice.</td> </tr> </table>			: <sup>25</sup> When <i>he</i> made	to the wind	a weight	: and to the water	meted out	a measure.	: <sup>26</sup> When <i>he</i> made	to the rain	a rule,	: a <i>way</i>	to the thunder	voice.
: <sup>25</sup> When <i>he</i> made	to the wind	a weight												
: and to the water	meted out	a measure.												
: <sup>26</sup> When <i>he</i> made	to the rain	a rule,												
: a <i>way</i>	to the thunder	voice.												
+ <sup>27</sup> Then,	<i>he</i> SAW	her and appraised <i>her</i> ,												
. established <i>her</i>	and also	explored <i>her</i> .												
+ <sup>28</sup> And <i>he</i> said	to humankind:													
: 'Behold! The fear	of the <i>Lord</i>	that is <i>Wisdom</i> ,												
: and turn	from evil,	UNDERSTANDING'.												

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The third passage (23-28) is composed of three parts of one single piece. The passage begins and finishes with an explicit reference to God that persists in the use of the suffix of the third person masculine singular of the verbs. This reference alternates with the implicit and explicit allusion to wisdom, also attested in the suffix of the third feminine singular of some other verbs. This textual strategy strengthens the peculiar relation between God and wisdom, validated also in his extraordinary capacity to discern hidden things (24). It is because God's vision penetrates the farthest reaches of the universe, even before its present created form, that God can discern the abode of wisdom (23). The centre of the passage (25-26) is focused on God's creative power, precisely in God's control over the pressure of wind and the measure of water and in God's supremacy to attribute to the rain a rule and to the thunder a voice. The temporal sense suggests that it was within the process of God's creative power that wisdom became known and understood. The author goes beyond traditional hymnal acclamations of God as the mighty creator. The wind is more than moving emptiness; its precise pressure is determined in the balance of all things (25a). The waters of the universe are not a simple chaotic mass of cloud, rain and sea; they are meticulously controlled and measured (25b). Rains and thunderstorms are not simple haphazard happenings; they are events which are part of the fundamental ordering of things (26). This enlightenment suggests a peculiar dimension of God's action in creation: God does not simply create. The relation with the first and third part (23-24, 27-28) shows that God's creative power is enriched with wisdom; she is the mysterious reality that simultaneously rules creation (25-26) and is revealed to God in the very process of creation (24, 27). She is apparently the ordering principle of creation, but also the hidden design and designer behind all things. It is in the process of scanning the entire earth and seeing all that heaven encompasses (24) that God sees Wisdom, discovering her amid the totality of all things and establishing her as the crucial principle of creation (27). The last segment of the passage (28) begins with an introductory formula that by standing outside the meter highlights what follows: a direct message to humankind. This direct speech together with the expression «he says» recalls the words of the deep, sea, death and Abaddon about the location of wisdom. The repetition of the two key words – understanding and wisdom



– calls for a provocative comprehension: while it is in the process of ordering and establishing the limits of the cosmic design that God discerns understanding and wisdom, human access her by fearing the Lord and turning from evil. In a certain sense, this difference between God and humans was expected and required.

## Biblical context

### *God understands wisdom's way*

The way is a major metaphor in the symbolism of the wisdom tradition. For example, in Proverbs (cf. Pr 4–6), wisdom appears as having her own way to offer guidance, direction and destiny for any who walk with her in that way.<sup>19</sup> However, the author of Jb 28 seems to move from these inscrutable ways of wisdom and the way she offers to her devotees, to the motif of the unknown way. Wisdom has a way that only God knows. The focus is not on the traditional way wisdom offers, but on direct access to wisdom herself. Wisdom is not only an eternal attribute of God (Jb 9:4; 12:13; 28:27; 38:37; Ps 104:24; Pr 3:19.20; Wi 9:2;), she is an invaluable figure whom God himself seeks to discover and acquire (27). She is not the figure portrayed by Pr 1–9 who stands in the streets or on the heights inviting mortals to walk the way she extends to them. This wisdom, that is the way God understands, is primordial wisdom, the hidden pristine wisdom, the first principle of the cosmos, the eternal one whom only God can discover in eternal uniqueness.

### *The way to wisdom of humankind*

In Jb 28:28, the author considers the human possibility of accessing wisdom through the fear of God, appealing to another key concept in Wisdom Literature. The problems and questions dealt with by wisdom traditions are quite diverse, and so the resulting picture of what fear of God means is highly differentiated. However, the assertion made in Jb 28:28

<sup>19</sup> Cf. N.C. HABEL, "The Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-8", *Int* 26 (1972) 417-430.

could be looked at as a variation of Pr 1:7 (*The fear of the God is the beginning of wisdom*), together with many others (Pr 1:29 *They have hated knowledge, they have not chosen the fear of Yahweh*; 2:5 *then you will understand what the fear of Yahweh is, and discover the knowledge of God*.; 9:10 *The first principle of wisdom is the fear of Yahweh, What God's holy ones know — this is understanding*; 15:33 *The fear of Yahweh is a school of wisdom, before there can be glory, there must be humility*.; Ps 111:10 *The root of wisdom is fear of Yahweh; those who attain it are wise. His praise will continue for ever*), reflecting the fundamental relationship between fear of God and wisdom. This relationship reproduces also one side of the dual tradition of Wisdom in Israel that on one side sees her as a mysterious pre-existent principle of God acquired and employed by God in the ordering and organization of the universe (Pr 8:22) and on the other side sees her as a way of understanding the world which is ultimately only attainable by mortals with the fear of God as their point of departure (Pr 1:7; 9:10).<sup>20</sup>

## The ensemble of the sequence

### Composition

The composition of the sequence has a precise focus. The author does not limit himself to a simple succession of images, with apparently traditional sayings interwoven. The first passage (1-11) built up on divine design and human ability immediately sets the theme of the place that comes back in each passage (1.6). In the first moment, the author focuses his attention on everything, considering that even the most hidden and precious metals have an appointed place (1). A place unknown to the most skilled animals (7), yet reachable to man: through his excellent capacity to go deep and to dominate nature. In the third passage, the author recalls the term 'place' to refer to the wisdom locus known by God (23).

<sup>20</sup> N.C. Habel thinks that "From the perspective of the theological wisdom in Israel, it is ultimately Yahweh who gives wisdom (Pr 2:6). The model for fearing God seems to be the patriarchal Job of the narrative prologue. For he it is who 'shuns evil' and therefore has 'discernment'. But that model of Job stands in conflict with Job of the preceding dialogue. The significance of this verse lies in the function of this counterpoint within the design of the book of Job» [cf. N.C. HABEL, "The Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-8", Int 26 (1972) 131-157].

<sup>1</sup> «Indeed, there is a source for silver	and <b>a place</b> for the gold they refine.
<sup>2</sup> From dust iron is extracted	and from stone copper is poured out.
<sup>3</sup> He puts an <i>end</i> to darkness,	and to every limit <b>he explores</b> , the stone dark and gloom.
<sup>4</sup> He breaks into a shaft far from habitation, (in places) forsaken by the foot,	they swing far from <i>human being</i> they sway.
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<sup>5</sup> The earth from it proceeds bread,	has lower regions convulsed by fire.
<sup>6</sup> <b>The place</b> of sapphires its rocks,	and dust-gold in it.
<sup>7</sup> A path (to it) the bird of prey <b>DOES NOT KNOW</b> , and the eye of the falcon has not gazed on it.	
<sup>8</sup> Wild-beasts have not trodden it,	nor did the lion pass over it.
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<sup>9</sup> He set their hand against flint rock,	and he overturns the mountains by the roots.
<sup>10</sup> He cut channels in the rocks	and their eyes see precious things.
<sup>11</sup> He dam up deep sources of rivers,	so a hidden thing is brought to light.

<sup>12</sup> But <b>WISDOM</b> where shall be found? And where is <b>the place</b> of <b>UNDERSTANDING</b> ?	
<sup>13</sup> <i>Human being</i> <b>DOES NOT KNOW</b> <i>the way</i> and she is not found in the land of <i>the living</i> .	
<sup>14</sup> The deep <b>says</b> 'It-is-not-in-me', the sea <b>says</b> 'It-is-not-with-me'	
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<sup>15</sup> She cannot be gotten with fine gold, and silver cannot be weighed as her price.	
<sup>16</sup> She cannot be bought with the gold of Ophir, nor onyx precious or sapphire.	
<sup>17</sup> Gold and glass cannot equal her nor vessels of fine gold be exchanged.	
<sup>18</sup> Coral or crystal not be considered; the price of <b>WISDOM</b> is above pearls	
<sup>19</sup> Topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal her, she cannot be bought with pure-gold.	
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<sup>20</sup> But <b>WISDOM</b> from where does she comes? And where is <b>the place</b> of <b>UNDERSTANDING</b> ?	
<sup>21</sup> She is hidden from the eyes of <i>all living</i> , and concealed from the birds of heaven.	
<sup>22</sup> Abaddon and Death <b>say</b> : 'With our ears we have heard a hearing of her'.	

<sup>23</sup> But <b>GOD UNDERSTANDS</b> <i>her way</i> ,	and <b>HE KNOWS</b> <i>her place</i> .
<sup>24</sup> For, HE looked the <i>extremities</i> of earth	<b>He saw</b> everything under heaven.
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<sup>25</sup> When he made a weight to the wind	and meted out to the water a measure.
<sup>26</sup> When he made a rule to the rain,	<i>a way</i> to the thunder voice.
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<sup>27</sup> Then <b>He saw</b> her and appraised her,	he established her and <b>He explored</b> her.
<sup>28</sup> And <b>he said</b> to <i>humankind</i> : Behold! The fear of the <b>LORD</b> , that is <b>WISDOM</b> , and turn from evil, <b>UNDERSTANDING</b> '.	

God knows wisdom's place in contrast to humankind that accesses wisdom only through the fear of God (28). Humans can know places of the most hidden and precious things in contrast to the most skilled animals, but they are not able to know wisdom's place, unless they relates themselves to God. The central passage (12-22) repeats twice the word place, relating it to the place of understanding and wisdom. Wisdom's place is blocked to human beings, because wisdom is not something that can be found in the land of the living (13); it is a reality that belongs to the concealed world (21). The reason is given at the very centre of the text: wisdom has a value that transcends the most precious and valuable things (15-19).

One other feature common to the three passages is the impact of the verb «to know». While in the first passage (1-11) this verb emphasises the existence of a deep inner reality unknown («not known») to the most skilled animals, in the second passage (12-22) the subject of the verb is human beings, who are said not to know the way of wisdom or the place of understanding. In both the first and second passages the verb is accompanied by the negative particle, contrasting with its positive meaning in the third passage (23-28). There, the subject is God and the verb occurs in a parallelism with the verb to understand, declaring wisdom's place as knowledge only accessible to God (23). There are several other particularities that confer a special sense and beauty on the text. Among them is the strong linguistic relation the words wisdom and understanding accomplish between the second (12-22) and third passage (23-28): while in the second they focus the centre of the human inquiry (12.10), in the third passage they oppose God's incontestable understanding of wisdom's way (23) to the human possibility of accessing wisdom and understanding. The first (1-11) and third passages (23-28) signal also two curious repetitions in the use of the verb «to see» and «to explore» establishing a parallelism between the human ability to explore limits and to see precious things and God's unique ability to see and to explore wisdom. This parallelism serves not only to affirm the excellence humans have in knowing creation, but also to clarify the absolute difference of their God's knowledge.

## Biblical context

### *A place to find wisdom*

In a significant contrast to portrayals of wisdom in Proverbs, Job asks, “*But wisdom where shall be found? And where is the place of understanding?*”, insisting it “*But wisdom from where does she comes? And where is the place of understanding?*” (Jb 28:12.20).<sup>21</sup> Wisdom leaves her eloquent, dynamic, vibrant, public figure that persuades and talks about herself, to emerge as mysteriously elusive, inaccessible and incomprehensible, *Human beings do not know the way and she is not found in the land of the living... She is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of heaven* (Jb 28:13.21). Pointing to new horizons, Job’s poem is not alone. We may find an excellent parallel in the book of Baruch (Bar 3,9–4:4). Like Jb 28, Baruch’s text can also be divided into three sections (3:9-13; 2:14–4,1; 4:2-4). Beginning with a call to repentance and an appeal for attention Baruch’ text makes two immediate associations (3:9-14): life with the commandments (3:9), death with defilement (3:10). The poem concludes with a response lauding God the Creator as giver of Wisdom to the Israelite people (3:32-38) and an exhortation to the audience to embrace Wisdom/Torah (4:1-4).<sup>22</sup> Both poems provide striking illustrations of the obstacles encountered in the pursuit of wisdom. Job 28 begins with a sustained image of ancient mining techniques to find precious stones and metals. Bar 3:15 alludes to treasuries or storehouses. Entrance is given as a privilege or a right of conquest, corroborating a thought that no human being, however powerful or privileged, could expect to enter the heavenly-sapiential storehouse. The exclusiveness of God’s knowledge of wisdom embraces both her abode and her origins. While it is clear that wisdom’s origins and existence are closely associated with God, the question ‘where’ remains. A closer reading

<sup>21</sup> This use of the term place in relation with a cosmic order is common in Wisdom Literature. Wisdom is seen as a reality that understands that each and every thing has its place; an order that rules and sustains the universe (Pr 8; Qo 1:4-7). However, since order in the larger sense is in many ways unfathomable to human beings, the term place can also function as an expression of the mystery of that which is inaccessible to humankind in both the cosmic (Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, and caused the dawn to know its place; ... Where is the way to the dwelling of light? And darkness, where is its place Jb 38:12.19) or in a wise scope as Jb 28:12.20 insinuates.

<sup>22</sup> For more details cf. A.M. SINNOTT, *The Personification of Wisdom* (SOTS monograph series) (Burlington, VT 2005) 92-93.

is needed to help us to find the possible link between these two texts in their response to the main question “Where shall wisdom be found?”

Jb 28:13-19

**Human being does not know the way, and she is not found in the land of the living.** The deep says ‘(She)-is-not-in-me’, the sea says ‘(She)-is-not-with-me’. She cannot be gotten with fine gold, and silver cannot be weighed as her price... the price of wisdom is above pearls... she cannot be bought with pure-gold.

Bar 3:13-32

They have not learned the way to knowledge, nor understood her paths, nor laid hold of her... **they have not learned the way to wisdom**, or given thought to her paths... **No one knows the way to her, or is concerned about the path to her.**

As we may see, in Jb 28:13-19 the search for wisdom includes human beings, the land, the deep, the sea, and concludes that it cannot be purchased or exchanged for any price, nor can it be valued. Baruch’s text (3:16-32) enumerates places (Canaan and Edom) renowned as sources of ancient wisdom (22); Ishmaelites (22-23 cf. Gn 16; 21); rulers of nations; Canaanites and Arabs; seekers after wisdom; writers of sayings; and giants of old who *perished because they had no wisdom* (26-28; cf. Gn 6:4; Nm 13:33; Wis 14:6), giving us the idea that even impressive stature or mysterious origins do not guarantee the possession of wisdom. An extension of the quest to the heavens and the sea as in Bar3:29-31 and Jb 28:13-14 fails to bring success. More surprising is the announcement that wisdom cannot be bought for *pure gold* (Bar 3:29-30; b 28:14-19.24; cf. Pr8:10-11). The comprehension that no living creature *knows the way to her* (Bar 3:20-21.23.27.31) encapsulates the mystery surrounding wisdom in these texts.

Jb 28:23-27

But **God understands the way to her, and he knows her place.** For he looked the extremities of earth, he saw everything under heaven. When he made a weight to the wind, and meted out to the waters a measure, when he made a rule for the rain and a way to the thunder voice. Then he saw her and appraised her, he established her and he explored her (cf. Sir 1:9-10).

Bar 3:24-27

...the one who knows all things knows her, he found her by his understanding. The one who prepared the earth for all time filled it with four-footed creatures; the one who sends forth the light, and it goes; he called it and it obeyed him, trembling; the stars shone in their watches, and were glad; he called them, and they said: 'Here we are!' They shone with gladness for him who made them. This is our God; no other can be compared to him.

Another contrasting motif is in the references and allusions to God's knowledge (Bar 3:32-36 and Jb 28:23-28). God is depicted as an omniscient Creator and Lord of creation, suggesting that while wisdom is distinct from the works of creation, she is not separate from them: she is present and visible to God. Wisdom appears in both texts as something manifested in creation because God has bestowed her upon creation. Those who fail to recognize wisdom as God's mystery in all creation will not find her. God's uniqueness is inseparable from God's association with wisdom. God alone found the way to wisdom (Jb 28:23; Bar 3:36-37). However, Bar 3:36 not only answers the question "Who has found her place?" (Bar 3:15) but also shows a distinct divergence from Jb 28 in claiming that wisdom was given exclusively to the people of Israel (Bar 3:38);<sup>23</sup> and while Jb 28 prefers to transform what was a futile quest for wisdom into a viable enterprise to be embraced '*Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding*' (Jb 28:28), Bar 4:1 declares '*She is the book of the commandments of God, the Law that endures forever. All who hold her fast will live, and those who forsake her will die*'. Although both poems deal with the inaccessibility and elusiveness of wisdom, there is a startling contrast between the exclusive claim made in Bar 3:36-37 and Jb 28:26-27. No doubt Baruch remains among texts featuring personified wisdom, although it is alone in not alluding to the much lauded wisdom requirement of 'fear of the Lord', that is essential for wisdom in Jb 28:28. Such a requirement is supplanted by linking wisdom with the Torah.

<sup>23</sup> About the disputed translation of Bar 3:36 cf. M. SIMONETTI, *Biblical Interpretation in the early Church* (Edinburg, 1994) 129.135-136 n.41.

## Interpretation

### *Nothing is so deep and mysterious as wisdom*

The composition of Jb 28 shows evidence of well planned thinking. By establishing that the rare and hidden commodities have a specified place in the cosmos, the author prepares the way for asking about the primordial locus of wisdom, the most precious find of all (1-4). This inquiring establishes an important link with the challenge raised to Job by one friend (*Zophar*), about his ability to find the mystery of *Eloah* or the limit of *Shadday* (11:7). To find wisdom becomes similar to finding the mystery of *Eloah* or the limit of *Shadday*; one apparently as unachievable as the other. The author relates his conviction about wisdom as a deep mysterious reality by using the image of mining, converting it into a paradigm of probing wisdom at a deeper level in the cosmic domain. Yet, as one of the friends maintains (*Zophar*), the limit of God's wisdom is even deeper and beyond the farthest point reached by any miner (11:8). The deep fiery domain beneath the earth is more mysterious than anything on the surface but not as deep or mysterious as wisdom.

### *Wisdom as a debate about Knowledge*

In the ensemble of the sequence we detect within the tactful dispute about wisdom, a subtle debate about knowledge. This dispute recalls a traditional understanding that wisdom is not given to human beings through nature but through knowledge. This is illustrated by the frequent antithetical parallelism of sage and fool: knowledge is what characterizes the wise (Pr 10:14; 15:2-7), the righteous (Pr 11:9; 29:7), the prudent (Pr 13:16), and those with understanding (Pr 14:6; 15:16; 18:15). Those who are wise lay up (Pr 10:14) or conceal (Pr 12:23) their knowledge. While scoffers seek wisdom in vain, knowledge is easy for those of understanding (Pr 14:16); while the simple acquire folly, the prudent are crowned with knowledge (Pr 14:18). It is Yhwh himself and the divine authority of wisdom that cooperate to produce knowledge. All human knowledge can be traced back to its divine roots. No one can be expert in the complexities of life who does not begin with the knowledge that comes through God and dependence on God.<sup>24</sup> However, while some texts answered the question about the prerequisite for acquiring wisdom in theological terms (wisdom comes from God cf. Pr 2:6; Wi 9), others

<sup>24</sup> Cf. G. Von RAD, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville, 1972) 69.



preferred a more an anthropological one (wisdom stands and falls according to the right attitude of humans to God – fear of God – Pr 1-9; Jb 28:28).<sup>25</sup>

*There are levels of discernment beyond mortals*

As the phenomenon that integrates the universe, wisdom is personified and depicted as having an appointed place. Human beings, though they may have skill or knowledge, cannot find wisdom by themselves. The knowledge of humans cannot match that of God (13-14). In the context of the narrative, Job recognizes that he can not discern God's presence (9:11; 23:8) and *Elihu* tells him that some mysteries of the cosmos are beyond normal human discernment (36:39). The way was prepared to suggest that only God can discern the way to wisdom (23). The very same acknowledgement was implicit in God's enigmatic questions about the world's foundations and in Job's discernment to offer an answer (38:1–42:6). Behind it is the conviction that there exist levels of discernment which are beyond mortals, levels which belong to the discernment capacity of wisdom herself. Wisdom is characterized not only by her inaccessibility to mortals also by her profound hiddenness. Humans may be able to expose hidden things of the earth which even wild beasts and birds of pray cannot detect (7-8), but wisdom lies concealed from the eyes of mortals. It is an ability to see that humans do not have, but that God has. The single reason given for God's capacity to discern wisdom's place in the cosmos: God is his characteristic as an 'all-seeing' deity (24).

## Conclusion

*A challenge to the traditional contributions and to the latest Rhetorical Criticism suggestions*

I strongly believe the present study offers an important challenge to the traditional interpretation of the structure of Jb 28 and to the latest and analysis suggested by Rhetorical Criticism, suggesting a new comprehension

<sup>25</sup> According N.C. HABEL: "These two positions are complementary and reflect the dual tradition in Israel of Wisdom as a mysterious pre-existent principle of God acquired and employed by God in the ordering and organization of the universe (Pr 8:22) and as a way of understanding the world which is ultimately only attainable by mortals with the fear of Yahweh as their point of departure (Pr 1:7; 9:10) [cf. N.C. HABEL, "The Symbolism of Wisdom in Proverbs 1-8", *Int* 26 (1972) 131-157].

that is able to unveil the role of Jb 28 in the design of the whole book of Job. It is true that, contrary to traditional exegesis, Biblical Rhetorical Analysis shares with Rhetorical Criticism the view that Jb 28 is part of the entire book's plot design, relating it to the rhetorical situation of the book and strategy. Both argue that the significant and integral role of Jb 28 within the plot and purpose of the entire book cannot be seen unless the integrity of the piece as a whole is accepted: all the parts of Job are tightly knitted together. A removal of any single part will damage the entire plot structure. It is the thread of the plot which knits Jb 28 and the rest of the book closely together, and not the contrary. In this sense, the final meaning of Jb 28 should be looked as coming from the whole book, and not the contrary. We may experience this in the collapse of the debate that signifies the limitations of human understanding in probing the mystery of suffering. Looking within the plot design, Jb 28 is not a simple «pause», but it serves as a conclusion to and a judgement upon the dialogue (Jb 3-27). More importantly, *the fear of the Lord* and *avoidance of evil* in Jb 28:28 functions as a deliberate foil triggering Job's actions in chapters 29-31. In fact, God's promise will never be to rescue Job from his present plight, nor does it grant him any understanding about the reason for his suffering.

The central issue of the book is the conflict between Job and God's integrity. In the prologue Job is portrayed as a flat character with a single trait – a blameless and upright man who accepts his fate submissively. But in the dialogue Job is depicted as a genuine character, who lays bare his inner life. Previously, Job appeared to strongly oppose his friends' interpretation of his suffering through theodicies. But later he uses his friends' standpoints to make his own argument. The abrupt shift from the silent Job in the prologue to the verbose Job in chapters 3-21, and then to the ambiguous Job in chapters 22-31 seems to threaten the unity of the book. However, it is actually Job's integrity that holds these three portrayals together. Therefore, the apparent inconsistency of tone and content between Jb 28 and its context can be well understood. Neither Job nor his friends know how to reconcile the existence of evil and the goodness of God. To defend God's integrity the friends consider Job's suffering as evidence of his sins. To defend his own integrity Job charges God with injustice in governing the world. In such literary context, the role of Jb 28 is to expose the inadequacy of traditional theology to understand the relationship between suffering and the goodness of God.

The traditional belief of *fearing God* and *shunning evil* as a possible answer to Job's questions can be seen, in light of the composition of Jb 28, as an

excellent re-evaluation. The author seems to go from truth to the whole truth. First there is the inadequacy of the friends' perspective exposed by Job, then the inadequacy of Job's perspective disclosed by God's rebuke and instruction. Inside this whole, Jb 28 functions as a transition, concluding the disclosure of the inadequacy of the friends and setting the stage for God to reveal the inadequacy of Job's perspective. The calm tone and contemplative content of Jb 28 may give a wrong impression that Job has found the answer to his questions. We should keep on reading, because the book does not reach its climax until God's speeches (38-41).<sup>26</sup> There, the author states clearly that from God's perspective the innocent can suffer and the existence of evil does not necessarily rule out the goodness and justice of God. The sufferer needs to hold fast to faith in God even though he does not know the reason for his suffering. In that sense, Jb 28 represents Job's second-hand knowledge of God, which he gains through hearing, whereas the divine encounter underscores the first-hand experience of God in which true and living faith takes root. True wisdom must be rooted in first-hand knowledge of God.

*Job 28 as a peculiar moment in wisdom thought*

Accepting that wisdom is beyond the reach of humanity, Jb 28 places images of wisdom's inaccessibility that contrast sharply with diverse wisdom utterances where wisdom speaks and is spoken about, *I will pour out my thoughts to you, I will make my words known to you* (Pr 1:23); *The Lord created me at the beginning* (Pr 8:22); *whoever finds me finds life* (Pr 8:35); *come and eat of my bread* (Pr 9:5); *Before the ages, in the beginning God created me* (Sir 24:9); *The first human did not know wisdom fully, nor the last one fathom her* (Sir 24:28); *She is the book of the commandments of God* (Bar 4:1); *She is an initiate in knowledge of God and an associate in God's works* (Wis 9:4); *People were taught what pleases you, and were saved by wisdom* (Wis 9:18). We still include here the successive descriptions of wisdom that enhance her growth and development as in wisdom's hymn of self-praise (24:1-22) identified with the Torah (Sir 24:23-34); the wisdom given by God to Jacob/Israel, living among human beings as Torah (3:9 – 4:4); and

<sup>26</sup> Cf. A.M. SINNOTT, *The Personification of Wisdom* (SOTS monograph series) (Burlington, VT 2005) 8: "I argue that Jb 28 functions in the book to indicate that Job's questions cannot be resolved by his friends because the place of understanding is elsewhere, perhaps pointing to chapters 38-41."

wisdom as a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty (7:7-10:18), her divine origin and her presence at creation (Pr 8:22-29; Sir 1:4.9-10; 24:3.9), as fashioner of all things (Wis 7:22) or mother (Wis 7:12); that orders all things well (Wis 8:1); knows the structure of the world and its elements (Wis 7:17-22) and takes her delight in being with human beings in the created world (Pr 8:4.31-36; Sir 24:7).

However, Jb 28 integrates imagery impossible to ignore. It cannot be looked at in isolation because it shares entirely the complexity and charm of an enigmatic figure, where two popular Jewish motifs are interwoven: the search for wisdom and wisdom's elusiveness; wisdom's accessibility and wisdom's hiddenness. The wisdom sought with effort and 'discipline' (Pr 4:10-27; 6:6; Sir 4:17; 6:18-36; Wis 1:5; 7:14), and the wisdom that escapes human searching (Jb 28), because she is a gift from God (Pr 2:6; 8:22-36; Ps 105:22; Sir 1:9-10.26; 6:37; Wis 7:7; 9:4). And inside this weaving, we notice that Wisdom's association with God and with human beings goes hand in hand with her vitality and moral persuasiveness expressed in her practical moral advice, her concern with behaviour, her elusiveness; her association with the fear of the Lord, her teaching in public and her power to save. She goes from an elusive and inaccessible figure in Jb 28 to a figure that transcends created limitations, exercising divine power in creative and saving deeds in Wis 6-10 showing that personifications of wisdom are coloured by their settings, the intentions of their authors and their canonical placements. And underlining the flexibility exercised by these authors, she witness to creation (Pr 8:22-32), protects, delivers and saves (Wis 9:18-10:10), teaches in the market place (Pr 1:20-21) and in highways (Pr 8:1-2), is seen, declared, established and searched out by God (Jb 28:27), pitches her tent in Israel (Sir 24:7-11); one with the Torah (Sir 24:23; Bar 4:1), inseparable from God creating the world, yet remaining with God (Wis 7:22b- 8:1). By depicting wisdom in such surprisingly fresh and courageous imagery, the wisdom writers portray God's activity and presence in the created world, while respecting God's openness and mystery. This is why we strongly believe, that when completely integrated in this wisdom thought, Jb 28 represents through its beauty, singularity and questioning, an undoubtedly unique insight.