

The foolish wisdom of humans versus the wise wisdom of God in the book of Isaiah



Author:

Chris van der Walt¹

Affiliation:

¹The Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Chris van der Walt,
chris.vanderwalt@nwu.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 24 June 2024

Accepted: 22 Aug. 2024

Published: 10 Oct. 2024

How to cite this article:

Van der Walt, C., 2024, 'The foolish wisdom of humans versus the wise wisdom of God in the book of Isaiah', *In die Skriflig* 58(1), a3108. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.3108>

Copyright:

© 2024. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

When wisdom in the book of Isaiah is investigated, there is a deviation from the normal sense of understanding wisdom as a particular mental ability. What is out of the ordinary about the use of wisdom in the book of Isaiah is that it is used more often for clearly unwise people than for the wisdom of God. In ten texts, mainly from Isaiah 1–39, the 'wisdom' of the unwise is juxtaposed with the wisdom of God. In these texts, all the dominant powers in the Ancient Near East are addressed. In this manner, facets of God's wisdom are brought to the fore, which is not evident in the semantic meaning of the חכמה word group, where wisdom typically carries the idea of normativity, or good character and virtue (Pr 1:1–7). Therefore, the focus of this article will be to show how the actions of Yahweh toward both his people and his adversaries portray his wisdom, with a clear indication of what his wisdom entails in the book of Isaiah. This study calls for the re-evaluation of wisdom, advocating for a theocentric understanding that aligns with Yahweh's will expressed in covenantal fidelity.

Contribution: The article contributed to the widening of understanding God's wisdom by showing how his practical plans emanate from his complete understanding of all events, highlighting an often overlooked aspect of the meaning of the חכמה word group.

Keywords: Isaiah; wisdom; unwise; understanding; practical wisdom.

Introduction

This article was initially presented at an European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS) conference where research on wisdom as one of the attributes of God was at the centre of discussion. When wisdom in the book of Isaiah is investigated, there is a deviation from the normal sense of understanding wisdom as a particular mental ability. What is out of the ordinary about the use of wisdom in the book of Isaiah is that it is used more often for clearly unwise people than for God's wisdom. There are several texts in the book where the *wisdom* of the unwise is juxtaposed with the wisdom of God. In this manner, facets of God's wisdom are brought to the forefront, which is not evident in the semantic meaning of the חכמה word group, where wisdom typically carries the idea of normativity or good character and virtue (Pr 1:1–7).

The only instance in the book of Isaiah where *wise* has the positive meaning with which it is usually associated is in Isaiah 31:2. It is also the only instance in the book of Isaiah where *the Holy One of Israel* is called wise. God's wisdom here is not mentioned in the regular disposition of an approach to life, but rather as a practical handling of matters, not only among his own people but universally.

Therefore, the focus of this article will be to show how the actions of Yahweh towards both his people and his adversaries portray his wisdom with a clear indication of what his wisdom entails in the book of Isaiah.¹

Approach and method

The hermeneutical approach undertaken in this article adheres to a canonical point of departure. In agreement with Abernethy (2021), the final form of the book of Isaiah in the Masoretic text will be used as the primary source. Attention will be paid exegetically to the historical context and literary presentation of selected texts in which the concept of wisdom appears. The historical context will be provided with each text discussed. To get an overview of the semantic domain of חכמה/חכמים, theological dictionaries will be used as an orientation.

1. There are a few books and articles written on the notion of wisdom in the book of Isaiah. Lindsey Wilson (2009) provides an overview of wisdom.

The recently published Oxford handbook of Isaiah also contains a chapter on wisdom (Abernethy 2020).

Note: Special collection: Biblical theological investigations into the attribute of God's wisdom.

When wisdom is mentioned, one commonly associates it with the kind of wisdom found in Proverbs, which encompasses a distinct mindset or manner of thinking. In Proverbs, wisdom is frequently associated with an approach that receives life's answers from God. However, there is more to wisdom than this, which can be found in Isaiah. According to H.L. Drumwright (2009), wisdom can also be considered to be skill, experience, shrewdness or prudence. Wilson (1997) shows that most of the occurrences of חָכְמָה refer to the intellectual manifestations of wisdom.

Another form of wisdom is also mentioned in the book of Isaiah, which is typically omitted from accounts of potential meanings of wisdom. In Isaiah, wisdom is occasionally referred to as being foolish. Therefore, the question arises: What is signified by the concept of 'foolish wisdom'?

To answer the above-mentioned questions, I first group and discuss the negative and positive occurrences of the wisdom passages, after which a conclusion will be drawn.

The general concept of wisdom

The first thought that comes to mind where the notion of *wisdom* is concerned is that it concerns a very high mental capability concerning cognitive processes in discerning situations. In the Old Testament, it is generally portrayed as something to be sought (Ps 90:12; Pr 4:5–9). The reason for this positive attitude towards wisdom can be derived from different definitions given for the notion. Dell (2006–2009) defines it as follows:

[A] quality of being wise, i.e., having the ability to make the right use of knowledge, being learned, discreet, skilful, perceptive, and judging rightly. It is the quality that transcends the human sphere to become a spiritual perception linked to God. (n.p.)

Swanson (1997b) also represents wisdom positively as 'the capacity to understand and so have skill in living'. To this, Müller and Krause (1980) add that the root reflects the understanding of reality inherent in ancient Hebrew wisdom.

What stirs curiosity is that numerous passages within the canonical book of Isaiah do not adopt the same affirmative perspective on wisdom and the wise, as adopted by Dell and Swanson.

Wisdom in Isaiah

Half of the 10 passages in which חָכְמָה [wisdom] and חָכֵם [wise] occur in Isaiah portray wisdom negatively and dismissively. The question arises: Why are individuals called wise half the time when their attributes do not conform to the definitions mentioned earlier? Five instances still occur in Isaiah where the Wisdom of God is portrayed positively and enlightening.

The texts containing חָכְמָה [wisdom] and חָכֵם [wise] that are of importance are shown in Table 1.

Some of the occurrences that Jenni and Westermann identify are translated as *skillful in labour* and *sages*, thus not fitting into the semantic domain of wisdom.

TABLE 1: The occurrences in Isaiah.

Verb	חָכָם	חֹכְמָה	חֹכְמוֹת	Total
None	9	8	None	14

Source: Jenni, E. & Westermann, C., 1997, 'חָכֵם' hkm to be wise, in M. Sæbø (ed.), *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, pp. 418–424, Hendrickson Peabody, CT.

TABLE 2: The passages in Isaiah where the notion of wisdom occurs.

Passage	The addressed	Hebrew word or phrase	The mood of the verse
5:21	Israel and Judah	חָכְמֵי	Dismissive to <i>wisdom</i>
10:12, 13	Assyria	וְכָחְמֵי	Dismissive to <i>wisdom</i>
11:2	Announce the shoot from Jesse	חָכְמָה	Informative positive wisdom
19:11	Egypt	חָכְמֵי	Dismissive to <i>wisdom</i>
28:29	Israel & Judah	חָכְמָה	Positive instructive of the wisdom of חָכְמָה וְחָכְמָה
29:14	(Ariel) Jerusalem	חָכְמָה וְחָכְמֵי	Dismissive – wisdom will perish
31:2	Those in Israel who seek help from Egypt	חָכֵם	חָכְמָה וְחָכְמָה is wise – positive
33:6	The destroyer Assyria	חָכְמָה	The wisdom of חָכְמָה positive instructive
44:25	Servant Jacob Israel	חָכְמֵי	The wisdom of חָכְמָה positive instructive over the wise
47:10	Babylon	חָכְמָה	Dismissive to <i>wisdom</i>

Source: Developed and based on Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Elliger, K., Rudolph, W., Weil, G.E., Talstra, E. & Hardmeier, C., 1997–2006, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia BHS (with Critical Apparatus)* (2017), Logos Research Edition, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

The passages in Isaiah where the notion of wisdom occurs can be seen in the schematic presentation in Table 2. The instances where a negative connotation is linked to wisdom are highlighted. It is noticeable that five texts convey a negative mood and five texts a positive inclination.

It should be noted that all these passages are written in poetic form.

The passages where *wisdom* has a negative connotation

The passages where a negative association with wisdom is made are predominantly found in Isaiah 1–39, with only one passage (47:10) from the latter part of the book.

In these passages from Isaiah, the following entities are addressed:

- Israel and Judah (5:21)
- Assyria (10:12, 13)
- Egypt (19:11)
- Ariel (29:14)
- Babylon (47:10)

Isaiah 5:21 – Israel and Judah are addressed

²¹Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes,
and shrewd in your own sight! ²

The verse under discussion is a part of Isaiah's prophetic woes found in Chapter 5:18–25. Within these prophetic woes, the passage addresses various sins that Israel and Judah, the people of God, committed, including land appropriation,

²All Bible translation quotes are from *The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (1989).

alcohol misuse, injustice, and pride. Notably, verse 21, the fifth woe, focuses on those within Israel who considered themselves wise. The term *בְּנִימ* [shrewd], used here, plays an important role in this context. The term, in a Nifal participle form, conveys reflexive action, signifying that the subject of the verb both performs and experiences the action of the verb, as detailed by Heiser and Setterholm (2013). This linguistic nuance communicates the idea that Israel's understanding of various matters was internally constructed, as further explained by Swanson (1997a).

Therefore, verse 21 serves as a lamentation in which Yahweh expresses sorrow over the conduct of the people of Jerusalem. The absence of wisdom is evident in their failure to align with Yahweh, as indicated by behavioural traits such as pride, injustice, a false sense of security and mockery of the prophetic word regarding God's plans (Abernethy 2020).

According to Ogden and Sterk (2011), the verse contains a chiasmus consisting of *wise>eyes<|sight<shrewd*. The general interpretation would be that the people of Israel flatter themselves by assuming that they are wise while being fools. They thought they knew everything, while in reality, a lot was lacking in their purported self-appraisal.

What was lacking was the realisation of their covenant violation. Israel was bound in the first instance, to Yahweh (Gn 12:1–3). Because all of them were bound to Yahweh, it involved a bond to one another. When the people of Israel mistreated one another, the implication was that they mistreated somebody who was in covenant with God. Land appropriation, for example, was not only a transgression against a fellow Israelite, but also against Yahweh, who made the land available to his people as a living space, where He could be served (Helberg 1990).

Breaking the covenant always has consequences, and thus consequences could also be expected in this instance. The consequences were the curses of the covenant (Dt 28:36), which were not taken to heart because their attention was elsewhere, and elsewhere was with themselves. Therefore, they went into exile according to the wise council of Yahweh.

Referring to Israel and Judah in this text as wise is therefore a lament from God and a reprimand that wisdom is not self-generated, but received from Yahweh, to whom they were all bound in the covenant.

Isaiah 10:12, 13 – Assyria is addressed

¹²When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride.

¹³For he says:

¹⁴By the strength of my hand I have done it,
and by my wisdom, for I have understanding;
I have removed the boundaries of peoples,
and have plundered their treasures;

like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones.

The observation made here is a recurrence of the concept of self-directedness, which is also present in Isaiah 5:21. In both instances, the assertion is made, 'by my wisdom', signifying personal achievement. The behaviour described as 'wise' in both Isaiah 5:21 and 10:13 implies living according to one's own standards, which is perceived as beneficial.

This leads us to question the meaning of the phrase *בְּחִכְמֹתַי* [by my own wisdom], used by the king of Assyria. The form *בְּחִכְמֹתַי* appears only here in the Masoretic text. According to Swanson (1997b), it means 'skill in war'. The king of Assyria boasted about his purported power, with which he believed he could manipulate the world's nations at his discretion, treating them as objects to serve his will. The arrogance of the Assyrian kings is well attested in the Old Testament (2 Ki 18:35) and the Assyrian royal inscriptions.

This utterance of the Assyrian king is further qualified by his self-motivation, that he has understanding (*בְּנִימָה* – Nifal). This is the only instance in the Old Testament where the Nifal of *נִיַּם* is used as a finite verb. It is a typical wisdom word often associated with *חָכְמָה* (wisdom) (Ringren 1997). According to Fretheim (1997), the word is far less common than *יָדַע* (know) and also has a narrower range of meanings. In contrast to *יָדַע*, the word seems less relational and thus refers to insight that comes from intelligence and understanding of a situation being observed.

There is more to the situation, however: Childs (2001) draws attention to Assyria's positive and negative role in the larger context of Yahweh's plan. Even though the Assyrian king was under the impression that his intelligence and skill in war were the reason for his success on the world stage, quite the opposite was true. Verse 15 provides the necessary perspective, revealing that Assyria was, in fact, the instrument of God's judgement against his unrepentant people. Assyria was thus only a tool in the hand of Yahweh, and in fact, the Assyrian king should have acknowledged Yahweh's punitive counsel. However, Assyria did not understand the deeds of God and ascribed them to their ability.

This passage highlights that ultimate sovereignty belongs to God, and anyone who holds a contrary view is exposed as misguided.

What can be deduced from the discussion above is that wisdom ascribed to oneself, should be viewed with distrust.

Isaiah 19:11 – Egypt is addressed

¹¹The princes of Zoan are utterly foolish;
the wise counsellors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel.

The historical relationship between Egypt and Israel must be understood to understand the verse under discussion. Through the centuries, Egypt has been the antipode of the

empires residing in Mesopotamia. The countries in the middle part of the Fertile Crescent were thus flanked by either Egypt or Mesopotamia. Israel often sought alliances with Egypt to counter the might of Assyria and Babylon. To discourage Israel from seeking help from Egypt, who could not help them, Isaiah addresses Egypt, but in reality, the people of Jerusalem (Snijders 1969).

The princes of Zoan addressed here were the highest-ranking members of the Pharaoh's court and the priesthood. They were representatives of the noble families of Egypt, residing in the city of Zoan, located in the upper Delta in north-east Egypt. These princes considered themselves to be the direct descendants of the most ancient noble clans in the country, and were the perceived bearers of wisdom passed down through the ages. The cultural memories, recorded on papyrus for generations, were available to them and had great authority. They took great pride in inheriting the handed-down wisdom (Matthews, Chavalas & Walton 2000).

Even though they considered themselves wise, they had no political answer when Egypt's dependence on the Nile was challenged by the annual flood staying away and the Nile drying up (Is 19:5). The gift of the Nile, considered an Egyptian god, was no match for Yahweh. If He decided to withhold the yearly inundation of the Nile, there would be no other way for Egypt to provide a livelihood for its people (Stuart 2006).

The wise advisers of Pharaoh were also no match for the council and wisdom of Yahweh. They had no insight into the plans Yahweh had concerning Egypt. Thus, they could not advise the Egyptians regarding their livelihood, or political problems (Abernethy 2020). Although the wise of Egypt were proud of their handed-down knowledge, they failed to understand and adequately react to crises which Yahweh brought over their lives. Their incompetence in dealing with these crises underscores the lack of importance their genealogical lineage and acquired knowledge, in reality, had.

On the other hand, the passage underscores the historical imprint Yahweh had on Egypt. It was not only the Princess of Zoan that influenced Egypt's history but also Yahweh. In the past, during the exodus, Yahweh showed his power in Egypt in the region of the north-eastern Nile Delta, when He led his people out of slavery, demonstrating his wisdom and dependability in Egypt (Kaiser 1987).

Oswalt (1986) shows the link between this verse and the later challenges to the gods in Chapters 43:8, 44:6 and 45:20 of Isaiah. Just as the gods could not make known the future, or explain the past, so could the wise men of Egypt not foretell the plans that lie in store for Egypt's future. Therefore, the advice the so-called *wise* gave to Pharaoh was of no value.

The prophet thus mocks Pharaoh's wise counsellors, saying that they cannot declare what Yahweh has decided about

Egypt. Instead of communicating the reality of God's plan, the *wise* of Egypt offered their own. They were thus not in feeling with the supreme *רַצִּי* (counsellor), whose plans would be the coming reality for Egypt (Abernethy 2020).

Isaiah 29:14 – Ariel or Jerusalem is addressed

¹⁴The wisdom of their wise shall perish,
and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.

Isaiah 28–35 contains a mixture of judgement proclamations and deliverance promises. One of these judgement proclamations concerning Judah is found in Isaiah 29. The reason for the judgement being passed, was Judah's reliance on religious ritualism (29:13). It is against this background that Jerusalem is addressed as Ariel (Hays 2010). It is the only chapter in the Bible where the name *Ariel* is used for a city (29:1, 2 & 7). As far as the meaning of the name is concerned, there are different opinions. What is not contested is that the name refers to Jerusalem because it is identified as the city where David encamped.

A summary of the possible meanings of the name is given by Longman (2017), who states that it could mean 'Lion of God', but most likely refers to 'altar hearth', which links it to the temple in Jerusalem. Smith (2007) clarifies this further, by stating that it is the place where sacrifices were burned within the temple complex. It makes the most sense to interpret it this way, because the genre is a lamenting woe, weeping for Ariel, where Zion's great theological traditions were kept in place.

The theological traditions were, in reality, not focused on God, though, as Judah's heart was not committed to Yahweh. For all their outward zeal, it was a feigned form of worship. Their so-called fear of the Lord was, in effect, nothing more than a following of standards set by men. Therefore, the wisdom of the wise was not wisdom at all, but superficial wisdom which would be brought to nothing by God (Kaiser 1987).

Wilson (2009) points to the view that some think Isaiah was not sympathetic towards wisdom, because he predicts the end of wisdom and discernment of the sages here. The view, however, is inconsistent with the high esteem Isaiah had for wisdom. What Isaiah opposes is not wisdom itself, but rather false wisdom. If wisdom is separated from the fear of the Lord, it becomes useless and folly. Therefore, the negative stance towards wisdom is against cultic worship, where both cult and worship have gone wrong. Therefore, the apparent stance against wisdom is not an actual projection against wisdom as such, but against a kind of wisdom that does not serve the purpose of honouring God.³

If Isaiah 19:11 and 29:14 are compared, the irony is that Jerusalem had access to Yahweh as the true counsellor for their entire existence, whereas Egypt lacked it. Nevertheless,

³This verse is quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:19.

Judah lacked the same wisdom as Egypt, because they did not take the available wisdom from Yahweh to heart.

Isaiah 47:10 – Babylon is addressed

¹⁰You felt secure in your wickedness;
you said, 'No one sees me'.
Your wisdom and your knowledge
led you astray,
and you said in your heart,
'I am, and there is no one besides me'.

The last of the passages in Isaiah where wisdom is portrayed negatively is Isaiah 47:10, which will now be discussed.

Grogan (2008) indicates that there is a general agreement among scholars that this chapter in which Babylon is addressed constitutes a unity. The overarching theme of the chapter is a divine judgement of Babylon herself. Babylon as a city never entertained the thought that she would be stripped bare as judgement over her mistreatment of the Hebrew exiles (Fee & Hubbard 2011). It is well known that Babylon was famous for her sorcery and divination, to which books from archaeological excavations attest (Hays & Duvall 2014).

The people of Babylon relied on their magicians and sorcerers to provide a prediction of the coming enemy, which would put Babylon in a position to defeat them. The intellectual and the magical world were thus intertwined, and the wise men were also instructed in all the arts of the supernatural (Blenkinsopp 2008). Therefore, Babylon's perceived wisdom and knowledge were only based on enchantments and magic. All the schemes of the wise brought no political or military advice of practical value (Watts 2005b). Although Babylon's diviners and sorcerers tried to predict her future, they could not save the city from anyone and were thus led astray by false knowledge (Childs 2001).

The problem with Babylon was that she had a sense of safety provided by all her diviners, magicians and enchanters. This led to Babylon having a divine sense of self, and acting as if God did not exist and as if He could not judge her (Smith 2009).

Summary of wisdom passages, where wisdom is portrayed negatively

In the book of Isaiah, the concept of wisdom emerges as a significant theme, particularly when viewed in light of the prophetic woes, directed at the so-called 'wise'. The passages explored thus far have shown the characteristics and implications of misguided wisdom, revealing several insights.

The first insight is that those deemed unwise possess the ability to use knowledge. However, they lack the capacity to understand and integrate this knowledge into political,

social, and religious life, in a way that sustains and improves both individual and societal well-being. Their *wisdom*, as portrayed in Isaiah, is thus fundamentally flawed because it cannot provide answers to the issues of life.

Secondly, the judgement passages highlight that the unwise constructed their wisdom internally, without seeking alignment with Yahweh's divine plans. This self-derived wisdom not only strayed from divine guidance but also did not recognise that transgressing the covenant with Yahweh meant transgression against other covenant-bound individuals. Their adherence to inherited standards, which neglected Yahweh's directives, further exemplified their misguided approach.

Thirdly, some individuals mistakenly equated intelligence and military ability with true wisdom. Isaiah's critique underscores that genuine wisdom is not found in intellectual or strategic skills alone, but in a deep, covenantal relationship with Yahweh, and an understanding of his will expressed in the standards of the law.

The wisdom of humans, depicted in Isaiah in an often sarcastic manner, serves as a cautionary example. It demonstrates the dangers of relying on human intellect and tradition, without seeking divine guidance. All nations, including Israel, share this misguided approach, and thus all nations will experience the same result by falling by the hand of Yahweh, whose council is the source of wisdom.

As Isaiah conveys, true wisdom is rooted in a faithful adherence to Yahweh's standards, surpassing mere knowledge and skill. This section calls for a re-evaluation of what constitutes real wisdom, urging a return to a theocentric understanding that aligns with Yahweh's plans and sustains both personal and communal life.

The wisdom of Yahweh will subsequently be investigated, to understand what wisdom in Isaiah means appropriately.

Positive instructive wisdom

Interestingly enough, passages with a positive association with wisdom are also predominantly found in Isaiah 1–39, like those with a negative connotation. There is also only one passage (44:25) from the latter part of the book with a positive connotation.

The listed chapters from Isaiah are analysed and address the entities and matters in more detail in the subsequent sections:

- Chapter 11:2 – The shoot from Jesse is announced
- Chapter 28:29 – Israel and Judah are instructed about wisdom
- Chapter 31:2 – Israel is instructed about wisdom
- Chapter 33:6 – The destroyer, Assyria, trumped by the Lord
- Chapter 44:25 – Servant Jacob, Israel informed about their formation

Isaiah 11:1, 2 – The shoot of Jesse announced

¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
²he spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

Brueggemann (1998a) draws attention to the newness introduced in Isaiah 11. Where Chapter 10 ends with devastation and even more devastation is expected, Isaiah 11 surprises the reader with Yahweh making a new beginning.

The introductory verses of Isaiah 11 deal with the Davidic covenant. It announces the coming of a descendant from Jesse, the father of King David. This king will bring new hope to people who suffered under the Assyrians because the spirit will empower him to have wisdom and understanding. This approach stands against the proud Assyrian tyrant who destroyed and scattered many nations (Smith 2007).

In verse 2, the spirit is mentioned four times. It is said that the spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. The spirit, therefore, plays a decisive role in the equipment of the king, who will come to rule. It stands in contrast with the Assyrian monarch who boasted about his own power and wisdom. On the other hand, the Davidic king does not rely on himself, but on being equipped by the Lord's spirit. The coming king's intellectual abilities are thus attributed to the work of the spirit, which brings about a different result than the Assyrian king's. The Assyrian ruler's thoughts brought destruction, while the Davidic king will rule with wisdom and understanding, leading to the continuation of the society (Grogan 2008).

Both of these rulers are linked to wisdom [חָכְמָה] and understanding [בִּינָה]. However, the result of wisdom in the respective persons is entirely different. The Assyrian king boasted about his own understanding and wisdom, which resulted in the fear he instilled in the world's nations. The Davidic king finds delight in the fear of the Lord, which makes life congruent with the intention Yahweh has for it.

The primary difference between the king of Assyria and the Davidic king is their reactions to their respective understandings of situations. Both are motivated by wisdom, but the nature of their wisdom differs significantly: one leads to destruction, while the other leads to a new beginning that benefits humanity. The Assyrian king lacked a broad understanding, focusing solely on his own influence and power. In contrast, the Davidic king's influence encompasses not only humankind but also the political sphere of every nation. This sphere of influence indicates that even nature was under the control

of the sovereign Lord (cf. 14:25; 40:7). The wise influence of the Lord thus applies not only to the macro scale of life but also to the day-to-day management of human affairs (Abernethy 2020).

Taking into account what has been discussed above, it can be said that wisdom leads to success, but the definition of success varies. In the eyes of the Assyrian king, success meant the oppression of people and personal fame. The success that God brings is fundamentally different, focusing on the well-being of all humanity rather than on domination and fame.

Isaiah 28:29 – Israel and Judah instructed about wisdom

²⁹This also comes from the Lord of hosts;
he is wonderful in counsel,
and excellent in wisdom.

The historical setting of Chapter 28 is before the Northern Kingdom of Israel's defeat by the Assyrians in 722 BC. It is an oracle against the drunken leaders of Ephraim, whose intoxication went hand in hand with a lack of control and social rejection (Matthews et al. 2000). This behaviour of the leaders made the Kingdom morally ripe for judgement because they rejected the divine instruction. However, the oracle addresses the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom, whose destiny would be the same if they behaved in the same manner (Fee & Hubbard 2011).

In a parable where a comparison is made between farmers dealing with their crops, and God dealing with his people, the message is carried over: God's wisdom lies far beyond that of humans. While Israel tried to avert the onslaught from Assyria, God made it clear that He would not save them from the onslaught, but that He would put it to good measure. God will treat his people in the same violent way grain is harvested and the seeds extracted. Even though they will be judged, a remnant will remain (Abernethy 2020).

Motyer (1993) explains further, by drawing attention to the biblical doctrine of creation, which portrays God's wisdom. What is revealed about the wisdom of the Lord is the foresight to plan; hence, wisdom achieves results humans cannot bring about. In this regard, the word תּוֹשָׁבֵהּ is used, and not חָכְמָה. תּוֹשָׁבֵהּ carrying the meaning of completing or finishing something because of the capacity to understand (Swanson 1997c). Verse 29 thus summarises the lesson of the analogy, namely that Yahweh of hosts is wise and deliberate in planning as well as in executing his plans.

Isaiah 31:1, 2 – Those who seek help from Egypt

¹Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help
and who rely on horses,
who trust in chariots because they are many
and in horsemen because they are very strong,

but do not look to the Holy One of Israel
or consult the Lord!
²Yet he too is wise and brings disaster;
he does not call back his words,
but will rise against the house of the evildoers,
and against the helpers of those who work iniquity.

The woe oracle in Chapter 31 once again begins with the conventional הוי. The background of this oracle is rooted in the Assyrian threat caused by the invasion of Sennacherib. Against the word of Isaiah, the people of Jerusalem looked to Egypt for help against Assyria. In their human wisdom, they believed they could avert the Assyrian threat in this way. However, seeking help from Egypt was blasphemous, because it conveyed a lack of trust in Yahweh (Goldingay 2014).

Egypt is named 39 times in the book of Isaiah, highlighting Egypt's influence on the Ancient Near East, and in this instance, Judah. Throughout Israel's history, they struggled to detach themselves from dependence on Egypt, as if it had answers that Yahweh did not have. This reliance on Egypt reflected a failure to appreciate the divine intervention Yahweh could provide (Watts 2005a).

Chapter 19:11 already indicated Egypt's inability to help. Seeking assistance from an inferior force is contrasted with the phrase וְגַם הוּא חָכֵם [yet He too is wise]. This contrast underscores God's wise response to the Assyrian threat of bringing disaster upon them (Childs 2001).

Significantly, Yahweh is never called *The Wise* in the Old Testament, although He is the source of wisdom for humans. Against this backdrop, the prophet ironically remarks that the informed leaders look towards Egypt in their wisdom, but not to Yahweh in his wisdom. In the practical situation of Assyria's invasion, a practical answer could only come from Yahweh, the master of wisdom (Snijders 1969).

A significant aspect here is Yahweh being called *the Holy One of Israel*, highlighting the special relationship between Yahweh and Israel. This designation is paradoxical, as a morally untouchable and holy God willingly enters into a covenant with the sinful Israel. The verses contrast the Lord with Egypt, describing the Egyptians as human rather than divine, and their horses as fleshly rather than spiritual. In the presence of the Lord, the Egyptians hold no significance in strength or endurance, compared to the Holy One of Israel. Those who sought wisdom and strength from Egypt would ultimately realise that true wisdom lies with Yahweh, whose wisdom is sovereign and enduring, unlike the temporary and passing wisdom of the Egyptians.

Despite Yahweh's covenant with Israel, they sought human alliances, that could not help. His Holiness necessitated chastisement if they did not turn to Him for help (Van Gemeren 1995).

In conclusion, Isaiah 31:2 is the only instance in the book of Isaiah where wise has the positive meaning with which it is typically associated. It is also the only instance in the book where the Holy One of Israel is called wise. Here, God's wisdom is not described in the typical abstract sense of an approach to life, but as a practical handling of the actions of the unwise.

Isaiah 33:5, 6 – The destroyer

⁵The Lord is exalted, he dwells on high;
he filled Zion with justice and righteousness;
⁶he will be the stability of your times,
abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge;
the fear of the Lord is Zion's treasure.

This woe oracle is the last one in the series of five, and the only one directed against a foreign power and not against the people of God (Grogan 2008). The foreign power is characterised as 'the destroyer', an ambiguous title fitting to any of the dominant Ancient Near Eastern nations. It is announced that the destroyer will be destroyed in turn to rectify the injustice committed. This likely refers to God's plan of destroying Assyria, because of their cruelty against his people. This announcement was intended to give hope to the fearful inhabitants of Jerusalem when the Assyrians threatened the city. The prophet confidently proclaims that God remains sovereign and in control of everything (Smith 2007). While the people sought help from Egypt, it was God they should have trusted and feared, as his sovereign power was available to them through faith (Grogan 2008).

Abernethy (2020) states that God himself will be Zion's abundance of salvation wisdom. This is the only instance in the Hebrew Bible where salvation is combined with any terms of wisdom. Abernethy explains the situation further as follows:

Uniquely, then, by uniting the theology of God being Zion's *יְשׁוּעָה* ([Isaiah] 12:2; 33:2) with terms related to wisdom from Isaiah 11, Isaiah 33:6 expresses the understanding that Yahweh's wisdom will be richly on display in saving Zion. (p. 344)

The final oracle clarifies the seemingly incomprehensible actions of farmers who first tear open the ground before sowing their seed. Similarly, Yahweh's apparent violent acts of judgement against his people serve a wise purpose. In his own time, and according to his own counsel, He will bring forth suitable fruits from his creation (cf. Isaiah 4:1) (Childs 2001).

The wisdom of God is something the people of Yahweh could not comprehend. This is evident from passages such as Isaiah 40:27, where the people of God complain that He does not care about them. However, this is not true, as seen in Isaiah 50, where God explains the rationale for sending his people into exile. The reason for the exile was not God's inability, but the unfaithfulness of his people. Despite being transcendent, God remained immanent among his people.

God's wisdom is demonstrated in his faithfulness to the covenant stipulations set out in Deuteronomy 28 to 30, which stated that unfaithfulness would result in Israel losing their land as living space. Although judgement led to exile, Yahweh's faithfulness would produce a remnant (Van der Walt 2014).

Just as everything has a reason for the farmer, so too does God, in his wisdom, send judgement or salvation as He sees fit (Smith 2007).

Isaiah 44:24, 25 – God's wisdom supersedes

²⁴Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer,
who formed you in the womb:

I am the Lord, who made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who by myself spread out the earth;

²⁵who frustrates the omens of liars,
and makes fools of diviners;
who turns back the wise,
and makes their knowledge foolish;

Isaiah 44 and 45 proclaim God as the sole creator of the world, the one who rules human affairs and can thus redeem his covenant people. All this is done according to a previously foretold plan (Fee & Hubbard 2011). At this point, Cyrus, the deliverer of the exiled people of God, was introduced. What God would do would frustrate the foolish efforts of false prophets and diviners, which is a thought that continues into Chapter 45. King Cyrus of Persia would confirm Yahweh's plan, which He previously made known to the earlier prophets (cf. Is 40:10; Childs 2001).

In verses 25–26b participles and verbs in the imperfect are repeatedly used to convey repeated action. This makes clear that Yahweh was not occasionally wise or occasionally directing the history of his people, but it is part of his character. In this way, God turned back the wisdom of the wise, who tried to apply the accumulated human wisdom to life's problems. In the Babylonian wisdom literature, only messages of hope are present, without a single forecast of doom. This shows the incompleteness of human understanding, compared with the complete understanding of God, who brought doom over Babylon (Motyer 1993).

Brueggemann (1998b) points out the wisdom of God, using human agents. While the people of God looked towards human forces to help them escape exile, God used human agency to rescue Israel and overthrow Babylon. Both the exile and the remnant returning have been directly and singularly the work of Yahweh, working through human agency.

In summary, the text highlights God's sovereignty as the creator and ruler of the world, who orchestrates events according to his own wisdom. The introduction of Cyrus as the deliverer underscores God's wisdom and control, and the

futility of human wisdom. The language used emphasises Yahweh's consistent wisdom and guidance.

Conclusion

The passages investigated highlight the contrast between human and divine wisdom. God's wisdom leads to a true understanding of political, social, and religious matters. However, human wisdom, when detached from the wisdom of God, leads to failure and destruction.

Because human wisdom has failed, a new Davidic king is introduced, empowered by the spirit of the Lord. He will govern with wisdom and understanding, standing in contrast to the self-reliant and destructive Assyrian king and all human dominion. Thus, true wisdom and successful leadership come from the spirit of the Lord.

The sovereign wisdom of God is not confined to understanding human situations only but is also reflected in nature, where his knowledge and deliberate planning reveal a wisdom that humans cannot attain on their own. God's wisdom leads to the incorporation of human plans into his greater plan for his covenant people. When God's people sought help from Egypt, it was evident that they had no understanding of the chastisement called for in the covenant stipulations. While He used the exile to chastise his people, they could not align it with their understanding of Yahweh. Thus, true wisdom for humans lies in trusting and consulting the Lord, even in times of despair, rather than relying on human strength and alliances. Yahweh's wisdom is shown in history as practical and sovereign, contrasting with the futile and temporary wisdom of Egypt.

God sometimes uses human agents to fulfil his plans, even without their consent and understanding. Thus, He used Assyria and Babylon to chastise his people, and Cyrus to fulfil the prophecy of a remnant returning to Judah.

In all these passages, Isaiah communicates that true wisdom is rooted in a relationship with God, who guides, plans, and controls with wisdom, emanating in practical situations superior to human understanding. This divine wisdom is essential for successful leadership, national stability, and personal steadfastness. The wisdom of God, unlike human wisdom, is thus foresighted, and ultimately beneficial for humanity.

Finally, human wisdom is often called 'wise' in Isaiah, in an ironic way to reveal that its perceived 'wisdom' portrays a lack of complete understanding of matters concerning the covenant, as well as an inappropriate reaction to the law as standard. This rhetorical technique of calling fools *wise* serves to underscore the superiority of God's wisdom over human wisdom. It also calls people to recognise their limitations and the necessity of seeking guidance and understanding from God.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

C.v.d.W. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by the author.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing does not apply to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

- Abernethy, A.T., 2020, 'Wisdom in Isaiah', in L.-S. Tiemeyer (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Isaiah*, pp. 334–350, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Abernethy, A.T., 2021, *Discovering Isaiah: Content, interpretation, reception*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Blenkinsopp, J., 2008, *Isaiah 40–55: A New Translation with introduction and Commentary*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Brueggemann, W., 1998a, *Isaiah 1–39*, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY.
- Brueggemann, W., 1998b, *Isaiah 40–66*, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY.
- Childs, B.S., 2001, *Isaiah: A Commentary*, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY.
- Dell, K.J., 2006–2009, 'The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible', in K.D. Sakenfeld (ed.), *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, pp. 1–5, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN.
- Developed and based on Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Elliger, K., Rudolph, W., Weil, G.E., Talstra, E. & Hardmeier, C., 1997–2006, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia BHS (with Critical Apparatus) (2017)*, Logos Research Edition, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

- Drumwright, J.H.L., 2009, 'Wisdom', in M.C. Tenney & M.S. Silva (eds.), *The Zondervan encyclopedia of the Bible*, Rev., full-color edn., pp. 939–945, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Fee, G.D. & Hubbard, R.L., 2011, *The Eerdmans companion to the Bible*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Fretheim, T.E., 1997, 'יָבִי', in W. Van Gemeren (ed.), *New international dictionary of Old Testament theology and exegesis*, pp. 652, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Goldingay, J., 2014, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, MI.
- Grogan, G.W., 2008, *Proverbs–Isaiah (Revised Edition)*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Hays, J.D., 2010, *Message of the Prophets: A Survey of the Prophetic and Apocalyptic Books of the Old Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Hays, J.D. & Duvall, J.S., 2014, *The Baker illustrated Bible Handbook*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Heiser, M.S. & Setterholm, V.M., 2013, *Glossary of Morpho-Syntactic Database Terminology*, Lexham – Logos Version, Bellingham.
- Helberg, J.L., 1990, *Die Verbondsvolk se verhouding tot sy land: veral in die tyd rondom die wegvoering in Babiloniese ballingskap: die Groot Profete en Klaagliederen*, PU vir CHO, Departement Sentrale Publikasies, Potchefstroom.
- Jenni, E. & Westermann, C., 1997, 'יָבִי', in M. Sæbø (ed.), *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, pp. 418–424, Hendrickson Peabody, CT.
- Kaiser, O., 1987, *Isaiah 13–39: A Commentary*, SCM, London.
- Longman, T.I., 2017, 'Isaiah', in E.A. Blum & T. Wax (eds.), *CSB study Bible: Notes*, pp. 1039–1136, Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN.
- Matthews, V.H., Chavalas, M.W. & Walton, J.H., 2000, *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
- Motyer, J.A., 1993, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester.
- Müller, H.-P. & Krause, M., 1980, 'יָבִי', in G.J. Botterweck & H. Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, pp. 364–385, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Ogden, G.S. & Sterk, J., 2011, 'A Handbook on Isaiah', in P.C.E. Al (ed.), *United Bible societies' handbooks*, pp. 750–751, United Bible Societies, Reading.
- Oswalt, J.N., 1986, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Ringgren, H., 1997, 'יָבִי', in G.J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren & H.-J. Fabry (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, rev. edn., pp. 99–107, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Smith, G., 2009, *Isaiah 40–66*, Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN.
- Smith, G.V., 2007, *Isaiah 1–39*, Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN.
- Snijders, L.A., 1969, *Jesaja deel I*, Callenbach, Nijkerk.
- Stuart, D.K., 2006, *Exodus*, Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN.
- Swanson, J., 1997a, 'יָבִי', in *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament) (#1067)*, Logos Research system, Oak Harbor, WA.
- Swanson, J., 1997b, 'יָבִי' (hāk-mā(h)), in *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament) (#2683)*, Logos Research system, Oak Harbor, WA.
- Swanson, J., 1997c, 'יָבִי' (tû-siy-yā(h)), in *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament) (#9370)*, Logos Research system, Oak Harbor, WA.
- Van der Walt, C., 2014, 'The deaf cannot see: An accumulation of blindness and deafness as combined theme in Isaiah 42 and 43', *In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi* 48(2), a1764. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v48i2.1764>
- Van Gemeren, W.A., 1995, *Isaiah*, Baker books, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Watts, J.D.W., 2005a, *Isaiah 1–33*, Word books, Dallas, TX.
- Watts, J.D.W., 2005b, *Isaiah 34–66*, Word books, Dallas, TX.
- Wilson, G.H., 1997, 'יָבִי', in W. VanGemeren (ed.), *New international dictionary of Old Testament theology & exegesis*, vol. 2, pp. 130–134, Zondervan., Grand Rapids, MI.
- Wilson, L., 2009, 'Wisdom in Isaiah', in D.G. Firth & H.G.M. Williamson (eds.), *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and approaches*, pp. 157, Apollos, Nottingham.