Our understanding of the history, literature and theology of ancient Hebrew Wisdom is hampered by certain unanswered and possibly unanswerable questions. Was wisdom at first primarily an intellectual and cultural phenomenon which gradually changed until it could be made the vehicle of religious teaching? Was its original objective moral training or intellectual development, or both? Was it directed primarily to the preservation of an established system of values in family and community life? If so, whence and in what degrees were these values derived? From common social experience? From the wisdom tradition of older neighboring civilizations? From the special beliefs of Mosaic Yahwism? And finally, was the “old wisdom” of the early monarchy an unitary affair, or did differing kinds and understandings of wisdom co-exist in some degree of tension?

Such questions cannot be fully answered because the surviving literary evidence in the Old Testament is insufficient and much of it is ambiguous. References to wisdom and wise men in the narrative books, in certain of the prophets and psalms are useful indicators, but in most cases are only incidental to other concerns of the writers. Esther, Daniel, Tobit and Baruch make relatively minor contributions. Our principal sources remain the five major “wisdom works”—Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth, Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon. Of the last three of these, the thought and general tenor, the literary structure, the Sitz im Leben and the approximate period of composition are fairly clear. There is more room for disagreement with respect to Job, and still more so with respect to Proverbs. The last-named work gathers together wisdom materials that are widely divergent in literary form, viewpoint and thought content, and—especially in the two sections entitled “Proverbs of Solomon”—in an almost haphazard arrangement. Proverbs is an accumulation of variegated materials old and new, apparently assembled for use as a source-book in a school for youth,¹ and edited by the principal author of the discourses and poems.

¹ Cf. Prov. i 2-6; xxii 17-21.
in chapters i-ix. Its content ranges from popular adages lacking any moral or religious content—such as “To a hungry man everything bitter tastes sweet”—to a profound theological exploration of the relation of wisdom to the divine work of creation. 1 The rhetorical discourses in chapters i-ix differ in literary form from the “Thirty Sayings of the Sages” in xxii 17 ff., with its Egyptian background. The distinction of both from the intervening body of discreet and heterogeneous couplets is striking, even with the recognition that here and there occur couplets which echo the teaching of the opening chapters. Equally remarkable is the great variety among the couplets themselves, in the topics treated and in the presence or absence of ethical emphasis and religious language.

It is therefore clear that the Book of Proverbs in its present form is the end result of a long process of compilation. The common denominator of the highly various materials of many origins and periods is that all could be used in one way or another for the purpose of instruction in wisdom. The problem arises as to how such variegated materials without contextual connections can help our understanding the history and nature of Israelite wisdom. In particular—to what extent and in what ways was this wisdom “religious,” and in what respects and to what degree was it “secular”?

These are question-begging terms. Religious beliefs and resulting attitudes in one form or another were so all-encompassing in the ancient world that no aspect of human life and thought lay outside its concern. Yet Von Rad can speak of “the sphere of the rational and empirical... (where) Jahweh could only be comprehended as limitation.” 2 This sphere may be called “secular” without prejudice to the larger question of a writer’s or speaker’s comprehension of and attitude to his total spiritual environment. The plain fact is that many of the “proverbs of Solomon” are secular in the sense that in themselves they neither express nor necessarily imply religious belief. This corresponds to the fact that the terms ḫokmah and ḫakam connote not only ethical and religious wisdom but technical and artistic skills and even the reasoning faculty. 3 They may be used pejoratively of the craftiness of the wicked. 4

1 xxvii 7b; viii. This adage appears also in The Words of Abiقار, xii 188; see ANET, p. 430.
3 Ex. xxxv 31-33; Is. xxviii 24-26; Jer. ix 16; Job xxxviii 36; xxxix 17.
4 Job v 12-13; xxxvii 24; cf. Prov. xii 2, 5; 2 Sam. xiii 3.