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A golden apple a day...

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**English transcript
to the
podcast**

A golden apple a day...

An introductory podcast to Judaic wisdom

English transcript

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AM: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast accompanying the METIS project; the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices. You can find us at www.metis.ethz.ch.

AM: In this edition, we will explore wisdom and storytelling in Judaism. My name is Anna Morawietz and I am pleased to welcome Andreas Kilcher and Kai Marchal to discuss this topic with me. Andreas Kilcher is Professor of Literary Studies at ETH Zurich and our expert in the studio today. Kai Marchal is Professor of Philosophy at the National Chengchi University in Taipei and will join me in Mr. Kilcher a few questions. Welcome Mr. Kilcher, and welcome Mr. Marchal!

AK: Good day!

KM: Hello Ms. Morawietz

AM: Let's get started with the first question right away. The Hebrew Bible tells of the wise King Solomon – a ruler whose wisdom of judgement has become a common concept in Western languages. In German, we speak of 'Solomon's judgement' (*'Salomonisches Urteil'*). Mr. Kilcher, what characterizes Solomon's wisdom?

AK: First, you have to imagine that the Solomon of the Bible is actually a kind of fictional character in these wisdom books. King Solomon lived, if he was indeed a historical figure, in the 10th century B.C. So there was this kingdom where the temple was built, the temple of Solomon, but the literature that is attributed to him as wisdom literature is clearly younger, from the 4th and 3rd century B.C. The famous sayings of Solomon, the parables of Solomon, are from the 2nd century, when he was also known as Solomon the preacher, or *Kohelet* in Hebrew. The song of songs is also attributed to him. These are the three great texts in which he is attributed with great wisdom, where he develops a wisdom of life, which then also awards him this so-called 'Solomon's judgment', which is distinguished, I think one can say most of all, by a high sense of justice even in the most complicated situations.

AM: That is very interesting. This means we have the figure of Solomon that is composed of different texts that were written at different times. What exactly constitutes the wisdom of Solomon?

AK: In order to find that out, you actually have to dive into these texts, into these texts that actually show Solomon in two roles, on the one hand as a ruler – he is a king after all – but on the other hand also as a kind of philosopher. One could, if one wanted to put this in a Greek context, compare him with a mixture of Socrates and Solon, thus a wise king, who connects these two figures, and who distinguishes himself already as a young man, son of King David, whose only request to God upon his coronation is to be gifted with wisdom. He doesn't want fame or wealth, he asks only for one thing, for wisdom. And because God feels that this is a very wise request, he gives him wisdom and the other things he didn't ask for, namely wealth, and fame, and health. So that's how we get to know him, and we then further get to know him primarily through two concepts of wisdom. One has to say, thought in a very universal manner, one is a way of life, a wisdom of life, an ethics, grasped under the term: 'acts-consequence construct', meaning that our actions contribute to our own

well-being in the end. The righteous person will be fine, and the fool and the wicked person will not, and in this sense, King Solomon teaches in his proverbs, or in the *Kohelet*, in this preacher, this wisdom of life and everything that is necessary to develop justice, to develop virtue as well as the knowledge that is necessary to develop this virtue.

AM: So here we have a very practical wisdom. You also spoke about a second wisdom. What distinguishes that one?

AK: Exactly. The second form of wisdom is a cosmic wisdom, you could say. Wisdom as a means of creation, which stands in a completely different place, but which is then also made the topic in the books of Solomon. One must imagine here a rather different constellation, namely not a man, a ruler, a wise ruler, but God himself, who is basically equipped with wisdom, not directly, but rather obtained in the course of creation. And she appears in the Proverbs of Solomon personified as a woman – it is a very interesting passage, where she appears – where it becomes clear that God, one could say, has created the creation with her. I could quote a very short passage from the Proverbs of Solomon where this becomes clear.

AM: Please.

AK: She says, in chapter 8: "I was set up from infinity, from the beginning, before the earth was, when there were no depths, I was brought forth,..." that is wisdom speaking, "when there were no springs abounding with water, before the mountains were shaped, from the hills was I brought forth,..." and so on. And then it states towards the end that God, as it were, played with her daily, with delight. So that's the term that comes up there and this playing with wisdom is basically a kind of, you could say, ludic act of creation.

AM: Do I understand correctly that this is how a distinction can be made between a wisdom that is practical in life and a wisdom that is divine?

AK: Yes, I think one could say that God is of course always the supreme authority, but for Solomon and, for example, his judgments, how he regulates the conflicts between people

and rules as a just ruler, the first form applies much more strongly. He must have a social feeling, he must have life wisdom and the other form, that is like presupposed, so basically the whole creation is based on the foundations of wisdom, which implies then that wisdom existed before creation. And she has, so to speak, given the instructions or the blueprint for a good, almost perfect world.

AM: So, the divine wisdom is a prerequisite of a practical wisdom?

AK: Exactly.

AM: Is there a Hebrew word for wisdom that runs through the texts of Judaism?

AK: Yes, one can clearly say that this is the word: 'Chokmah', which has in fact been preserved through almost three millennia, without great variation. The wisdom that distinguishes Solomon is the *Chokmah*. In the Middle Ages it continues to be the *Chokmah* and in modern times there is still talk of the *Chokmah*, but with a change of meaning. Of course wisdom in the 5th century B.C. in this biblical literature attributed to Solomon is not the same as the one in the Middle Ages in Jewish philosophy for example, the Jewish Kabbalah in the 15th, 14th century or in the 19th century, where there is still talk of Chokmah.

AM: Could you perhaps give us a little insight into the typology of wisdom in Jewish literature?

AK: With pleasure! The journey will take us through many centuries. We started in the Solomonic wisdom literature in 500 to 100 B.C., approximately, and now we are dealing with literature that actually developed outside of the Bible and still very strongly works off the name and figure Solomon's but is further expanded. This typology can only be given if we briefly consider a few texts, such as the extracanonical texts from biblical times, i.e. texts that were not canonically incorporated into the Hebrew Bible, but which very strongly took up the concept of wisdom. Interestingly, this was often linked to the Hellenic environment, which was already noticeable in Solomon, where the Greek concept of wisdom was already

of importance. Extrabiblical literature such as the 'Book of Sirach', or 'Chokmah Ben Sira' in Hebrew, is a text that was only taken up in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible in the *Septuaginta*, where you find a 'Ben Sira', who is not to be confused with the Jesus of Nazareth, he's just also called Jesus, Jesus the son of Sira, who runs an educational house and is modeled after a Greek school of philosophers and actually speaks as a teacher. This book is basically a collection of worldly and moral advice, and maxims. So that would be one example or, I'll just give a second one from this early period that is even more closely associated with Solomon, which is the Greek text: 'Sophia Solomonos', that is, the book of Solomon's wisdom. This text is also adopted in the *Septuaginta* and in the Luther Bible, where Luther named it 'The Wisdom of Solomon', and where you find among other things a very strong Hellenic influenced wisdom concept directed against the Epicureans, as well as a speech held by King Solomon on how life is led by mystical strength. A wisdom that is in a way a mystical power and perhaps even more comprehensively determines everything that, not only what we do, but also what we see. For example, prophecy, but also immortality and cosmic power is attributed to wisdom there. So, it almost has a more comprehensive function there.

AM: Very interesting. So, there are both the biblical texts in which wisdom plays a role, but also extracanonical texts. In this multitude of different texts in which wisdom plays a role, is there one type of text in which a Jewish understanding of wisdom becomes particularly clear?

AK: I think one must first understand that the texts, in which wisdom is written about, are very diverse. There is not one main type of text; we have seen with Solomon that parables play an important role. Wisdom is conveyed through a parable, the words of the wise are parables, which is also a standing term: 'the words of the wise'. Often, they are parables, but they can also be sermons, in which the didactic element is emphasized, or even narrations. And everything is then also directly reflected for example: the parable, the sayings of Solomon, the so-called saying in Hebrew is the 'Mishleh Shlomo'. *Mishleh* are actually parables rather than sayings. *Mishleh* is also an example of an image that is conveyed, and so the logic of that imagery is made the subject. One could say this grants a specific poetics of this parable speech, namely in the sentence: "The right word spoken at

the right time is as beautiful as gold apples in a silver bowl", one must find the golden content in this silver web of parable words. So a kind of depth of hermeneutics is required, an interpretation that is needed to uncover the meaning of these parables.

AM: You have now spoken of the parable as conveying wisdom. Are there other ways of conveying wisdom?

AK: Yes, exactly, I have already briefly mentioned Salomon the Preacher, that is the sermon form, but also very important because I have not yet gone into it: storytelling. There is a pair of terms in Jewish literature, namely: 'Halakha' and 'Aggada'. 'Halakha' is the religious law, that is actually a rather normative, defining form of writing and speaking and arguing, and 'Aggada' literally means the thing that goes, but actually refers to the narrative, the non-legal that is descriptive and exemplary. And the interesting thing is that the wisdom literature is now completely sided with the 'Aggada'. The 'Aggada' has the character of wisdom literature, meaning that wisdom is in fact always narratable, for example through examples, to be made vivid in stories, that is a very decisive element, and it cannot be normatively defined like the 'Halakha' as religious law, but it is always in process or in contemplation. This character and preference for narration runs through to Jewish modernity.

AM: So we have the 'Halakha', which proceeds argumentatively within laws, and the 'Aggada', which proceeds narratively and to which wisdom literature is counted?

AK: Right.

AM: At this point I would like to bring another wisdom concept into play. Socrates is an important figure of wisdom for the European tradition. You also referred earlier to the role of Socrates in the Jewish tradition. We know of Socrates and his life mainly through the dialogues of his student Plato; Socrates himself left no writings. He is known not only for his questions, with which he plagued his fellow men, but also for the saying: "I know that I know nothing". So we are dealing with a wisdom that questions concepts and beliefs and distances itself from knowledge. Behind such a wisdom of the knowledgeable could be

something like the striving for better self-knowledge in the sense of a life practice. The conceptual knowledge of definitions of *the good*, *the beautiful*, *the virtue*, *the just* and so on is left aside, since they are not particularly helpful for the improvement of one's own way of life. Now my question to you: is there a similar tension in Jewish literature between trying to conceptualize what is good, what is just, what is a life worth living, and a critical self-reflection on that attempt?

AK: Yes, as I just tried to make clear via the forms, the literary forms of wisdom literature, there is a reflection. There is a reflection not only on the parable and what the parable can convey, but also on narration, which one can say is ultimately preferred precisely because it does not only establish things in a normative sense – expanding on what I said earlier – but in a way that becomes much more vivid and in a way that makes teaching of wisdom much more useful for life practice. This cannot be prescribed, but it can only be shown, which is in fact the sense of the parables and the stories. If we go even further, this can be shown even more strongly in other forms, that there is a kind of refusal or avoidance of this determination, even in the forms of dialogue and commentary, which are two important components of rabbinic Jewish literature, especially in the Talmud. In the Talmud, basically everything that is debated is dialogical. Well, we know that also from Socrates, but there he is usually the only master of the dialogue and he always knows the answer. In Jewish literature, in the Talmudic literature, it is different. Here, the dialogue is always open and there are situations where there are simply several opinions that remain next to each other. Not one right one, but several, and the commentary actually has the same function, because it can always be further unfolded, even over centuries, as a collective writing of the commentary, without achieving any strict determination but rather, the application of wisdom on our way of life, on life practice, which can be developed historically not only based on places and cultures, where we may be at this moment, but also on specific surroundings. And that gives wisdom in Judaism a very open character.

AM: I find this very interesting, especially because the rabbinic commentaries also refer to legal texts. There seems to be a bridge here between normative laws and a way of dealing with religious texts that is oriented toward practical application.

AK: Yes, exactly. Maybe just one more comment that expands on that, if you sort of take up the image of the bridge, something like not knowing is not really envisaged in Jewish scriptural scholarship. So, it is actually always about finding a way or building a bridge rather than focusing on a point and stating that not knowing is in a way the highest wisdom that I can claim. That's almost a kind of mystical not-knowing. In the Jewish tradition there is always the assertion and the attempt to be able to say at least something, just as dialogically and openly as it can be. But perhaps one sentence is quite interesting from the Proverbs of Solomon, which is maybe a bit like the Socratic not-knowing, namely that whoever claims to have wisdom cannot be wise. So, this claiming for oneself: "I am wise" and playing it off against others, that can't be considered wise.

AM: We have just learned that in the Jewish tradition narration plays a very, very important role in wisdom literature. Mr. Marchal, how is this in the Far Eastern wisdom tradition?

KM: There is still often the impression that in Western traditions the supposedly stronger, argumentatively assertive practices of reflection have established themselves and that in the Asian region only narration has been practiced. And this impression is certainly not correct. Since you are specifically addressing narration, in, especially, Daoism there is a text, the 'Zhuangzi', which many of our listeners will also be familiar with, that is packed with stories, i.e. very concrete stories about two shadows that talk to each other, or about trees that communicate with people, and about dreams, about animals. It is very narrative and plays a very important role in Daoism and for Daoist wisdom. In Confucianism, you find less of this kind of excessive need for narration, or love of fables, it goes more in the direction of the wisdom of proverbs, that is, Confucius, as the teacher, expresses himself primarily in proverbs, or instructions. Mr. Kilcher just spoke of instructions for life, for the conduct of life, so the idea, I think, or this practice is very important in Confucius, so that, for example, with the ritual classic, you really have very concrete instructions for every, yes, detail of your own way of life: when to get up, how to eat, how to clean oneself, or what kind of clothes to wear – this becomes very detailed and there are certainly major overlaps with Jewish scholarship. Then there is the 'Book of Changes', a topic that might be discussed later on, which has often been compared with the Kabbalah, i.e. the idea that there is a single, important book of wisdom in East Asia, this idea is often associated with the 'Book of

Changes', the 'Yi Jing', which has a very long history, probably originating around 800 B.C., so a millennium-old classic, which essentially contains aphorisms, so little narration but aphorisms, that have great significance in life. The text was learned by heart at an early age, that is, in early childhood, when people were three or four years old, they began to learn this text by heart, so it was very present to them. These aphorisms, instructions for concrete life, which one could fall back on at any time, but on the other hand this book just contained all possible aspects of life. So it was meant traditionally. It's not only wisdom of life conduct, so to speak, but also how to lead the military. So strategic wisdom and then there is also something like economic wisdom, how to lead a family properly, or how to organize a state. So, for example, in the 16th century, a Chinese official could directly refer to the 'Book of Changes' when he wanted to make an argument for the reorganization of the markets.

AM: A very interesting mix between practical life instructions, relating to the individual's life, and very almost political science...

KM: Exactly,

AM: ...instructions, or perhaps theories in one book.

KM: Exactly. It's an incredible book and we're doing a separate podcast on it, so I encourage listeners to listen in there as well, yes. So Kabbalah, 'Book of Changes' and Kabbalah certainly have a lot in common and maybe you, Mr. Kilcher, can elaborate further on what you think of the Kabbalah.

AK: Yes, I believe the comparison was drawn rather late. It is an attribution, a link that was established at some point and I think again around the turn of the century by people like Martin Buber, who was very interested in Chinese ancient wisdom and at the same time in Hasidism, and thus he established exactly these links, in Hasidism in particular, as a late form of Jewish mysticism, he tried to establish analogies and also showed that the way in which in Hasidism, one could say, metaphysics and life practice are drawn together. A life practice that is suspended at the very top, is sought. For the stories of Hasidism are precisely such examples. They have to do with everyday situations, for example with illness,

with persecution, with everything that characterizes the life of Jews in small towns (*Städtle*) in Eastern Europe, including money worries, finances certainly also play a role and at the same time the metaphysical always plays into this life. There are angels, there are demons, they are omnipresent, and amulets serve to prevent, for example, Lilith from taking the firstborn. Lilith, the demoness, and this interplay of life practice and metaphysics, or even magic, one could say, strongly distinguishes the late Kabbalistic form of the wisdom practice, as it was practiced in particular in Hasidism. I am unsure whether this is really the case, or how closely it corresponds, but I have justified this with Buber because he directed a lot of attention to Hasidism.

AM: Could you perhaps explain very briefly what Hasidism is?

AK: Hasidism is actually a doctrine of piety, one could say, that came into being only in the 18th century, which revolves around the figure of the wise man in the sense of the righteous, the 'tzadik', as he is called there. 'Hakham', an expression for the wise person, is not used as much as tzadik, or rabbi, the 'miracle rabbi', who is entitled to give advice in every situation of life, to heal the sick, as it were, as a judge, doctor, community leader, but he can do even more, he can also see into the future, he can communicate with the angels, talk to God in prayer, so that is an insane concentration of competences that these so-called 'miracle rabbis' had in Hasidism.

AM: So also a combination of practical life instructions and magical elements brought together.

AK: Exactly.

AM: I would now like to address an important set of themes in wisdom literature that I don't think any tradition has ever neglected, namely dying, death, and impermanence. Michel de Montaigne, for example, states in one of his most famous essays: "To learn to philosophize is to learn to die." Arthur Schopenhauer also believed that philosophy and religion are mainly reactions to the greatest evil of human life, death. What significance

does death have in the Jewish tradition, and what can we learn there about how to deal with our own death and that of our dear ones?

AK: First of all, I would like to say that this very well-known phrase: "To philosophize is to learn to die," – I don't think you can recognize that in Judaism. Rather, philosophy or if we speak of wisdom, Jewish wisdom is much more about learning to live – and dying does not play a dominant role in the sense that it does not revolve around how can I cope with this state of finiteness. This also has to do with the fact that there is no clear dichotomy between this world and the hereafter, and that on the one hand the focus the present, on life one could perhaps say, is much higher, also the physical life, which is not devalued as in Christianity, but has its own dignity, as in life, the body, and at the same time the hereafter is also much more present, more naturally present. If we look to the Kabbalah once again, as the Kabbalah is, one can say, actually wisdom literature and a wisdom doctrine at the core, there death plays a much larger role than for example with Salomon, where it plays actually no role at all, similar to apocrypha or extrabiblical writings. There partly, but it is not the central topic. In the Kabbalah, one could say, the moment occurs in such a way that naturally life as we live it, physical life, is actually almost understood as a kind of exile of the soul. The soul is in the body in a kind of exile, but already during our lifetime the soul is actually always in contact with the 'World to Come', yes one could say with the divine world – the 'World to Come', a strong concept in Judaism: 'Olam Ha-ba', so literally the coming world, and the soul ascends for example already when we are sleeping, in dreaming, every night into this sphere. So, it doesn't have to die, it actually ascends into this world already during life every night, but returns in the morning and is united with the body. And this union with the dying ceases to a certain extent, not only at death, but according to the Zohar already 30 days before death when the soul, the 'Neshamah' actually leaves the body in a very fluent transition. So the body doesn't simply die and the soul disappears from the body, but this is already a, one could say, flowing process. And in the end, it is some kind of ascent of this soul to heaven.

AM: This means that Jewish wisdom literature cannot be understood as a therapy against fear of death, because the fear of death does not hold great importance.

AK: Exactly, because perhaps God is there much too naturally. One does not have to fear life at all, because it is part of the divine plan anyway, and one would never want to accelerate dying in Judaism, for example, or suicide is highly problematic anyways, so one would not meddle because everything that happens with the body happens anyway, including its decay. The physical decay of the body after dying is completely natural, one does not have to stop it. There is also no embalming or laying out in Judaism, as the body should be buried as quickly as possible so that the elements go back to where they came from. So, the notion of being made of dust and becoming dust, that is taken so literally that you actually don't stop this process, because it is to be reckoned with anyway, that is as a matter of course.

AM: What is the connection between wisdom literature and death, transience, perhaps also fear of death and suffering in Daoist traditions, Mr. Marchal?

KM: Well, in the book of Zhuangzi, that I just mentioned, there are some very beautiful stories about death and dying. The basic idea seems to be that every night when we dream, we basically already leave the “waking world” and basically enter another world, similar to what Mr. Kilcher just told us about in Judaism. So there is the distinction between the waking world and the dream world, so to speak, the famous butterfly dream, the parable of the butterfly dream that many listeners will be familiar with here, where the main character, Zhuangzi, the narrator himself, is not able to distinguish between the waking world and the dream world, he doesn't know where he is and there is no idea of a continuity between the waking world and the dream, so the idea of a soul that could connect these two states is rejected in Daoism. This is probably somewhat different than in the Jewish or Christian tradition, and perhaps even more radical, so to speak, the ordinary everyday consciousness in which we always recognize ourselves as, I always recognize myself in everyday life as myself, I am so to speak identical with myself. I am still the same as I was yesterday. These ideas are infiltrated or basically destroyed in Daosimus, so that this human fear of death, now I'm alive and in five years I'll be dead, that basically has no great meaning for the Daoist. A boundary between life and death itself is not recognized.

AM: Unfortunately, we've already reached the end of our podcast. I thank Andreas Kilcher and Kai Marchal for their participation and the inspiring conversation. I would like to invite

our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks and to browse the media offerings on the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices. You can find us at www.metis.ethz.ch. Right below the podcast you will find the link to our text archive. Thank you for your time and hopefully until soon!

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