Wisdom Actors, part 1

This article identifies several prominent classes of domestic and international government officials in the royal courts old-world Middle East and highlights the political careers of several individuals who held high-level positions in those offices. It is written at an intermediate level and assumes some basic knowledge of the Christian Old Testament and its wisdom tradition, but it also includes some discussion of officials from Egypt, Assyria, and Persia.

I have studied such narratives through the lens of wisdom over many years of research, teaching, and writing. These stories and their political actors are vitally instructive for our pluralist situations today. I wish I had been taught this as a young Christian. Instead, I was raised in the faith to see such narratives, indeed all of Scripture, merely as illustrations from which to draw "private religious devotion and personal moral instruction." And when it came to ancient Israel, I was taught to see only the gulf of dissimilarities between Israel and all other nations. I don't want to knock that up-bringing too much, because I learned a lot during those years from my pastors and Bible teachers, but the more I engaged in close readings of Scripture, the more the wisdom tradition began to speak to me, and the more I understood that my earlier way of seeing had unnecessarily limited what Scripture offers. I hope some of this comes alive for you as it has for me.

Caveat: I use the words ?the state? and ?politics? in this article in a general and loose sense, simply as a shorthand for the organizing and governing that must take place among a large group of people, even in ancient times, if there is to be domestic order not chaos. In other words, I do not mean the modern inventions of the state and politics that have been with us in the West since fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe.

This article is meant to be used with The Wisdom Tradition - See With New Eyes and Wisdom Actors Part 2, as well as Wisdom Words.

Political Actors of the Old-world Middle East
Learning wisdom from the ancients

by Charles Strohmer

Hundreds of years after Sinai, the people of Israel demand of the prophet Samuel that he should appoint a king to lead them, ?such as all the other nations have? (1 Samuel 8:5). However much that demand may indicate their rejection of Yahweh's governance over them through their system of judges (appointed since the time of Moses and Joshua), that is not our topic, here. Instead, I am pointing out this particular narrative because it is the moment in Israel's already storied history when a process was set in motion whereby Israel would become a formal monarchy like the surrounding nations. Today we would say Israel was on the path to statehood.

In the Christian tradition, this turning point period with all its multi-faceted opening up has suffered from being reduced to theological meanings surrounding the people's demand. This reductionism of the narrative has meant ignoring just about anything else than may be learned from the ensuing history. The area of focus on that history in this article will be that of the wisdom tradition's role in the lives of some of the prominent political actors during this transformative period, which entailed numerous political transitions, such as establishing a capital, enthroning a king, picking a cabinet, growing a bureaucracy, creating and institutionalizing national laws, raising an army, collecting taxes, and so on.

What has fascinated me in my research for The Wisdom Project is that as new state, Israel now had formalized its relations with

existing regional states (other monarchies). It is not that international relations suddenly began for Israel, for the nation had had dealings of all sorts with other nations. Instead, it was a time when Israel secured for itself equal footing as a nation among nations, which seems to be what the people were interested in, being somewhat comparable to what occurs today when a new nation-state joins the United Nations.Solomon modeled ?the Israelite state ... on the great states of the ancient Near East,? so that it ?acquired a structure similar to that of Egypt.?

Saul became Israel's first king, and after having fledged for forty years under Saul, the state was reorganized under David and Solomon, its second and third kings, who each reigned for forty years. Of this transformative period, William McKane writes that ?Israel became a state with a new political structure which demanded the creation of a cadre of royal officials through whom the king governed this people.? Solomon, in fact, not only added a huge bureaucracy, which increased the political structure in all directions. Much more than Saul or David had done, Solomon modeled ?the Israelite state ... on the great states of the ancient Near East,? so that it ?acquired a structure similar to that of Egypt.? (McKane, Prophets and Wise Men, 1965, p. 42.)

More significantly for us, here, however, is the obvious but often overlooked fact that the creation of the new state was not the work of the king alone. McKane, who was a professor of Hebrew and Oriental languages at St. Andrews until his death, reminds us that ?with the king in this new political structure there was associated a class of royal officials who had to do with the army, finance, foreign embassies and administration. Such officials were a ?people of the king' and had a common interest with him in maintaining the regime and suppressing popular resistance and discontent.? (Prophets and Wise Men, p. 43.)

Here, then, was a long period of dramatic political change for Israel, in which the nation's government formalized as a state, grew tremendously, and joined the community of nations. It is the latter area that concerns us in this article, especially the various political actors in it. For now as a member of the international community, Israel fell within the long established regional tradition for conducting international relations. And this was the wisdom tradition. There is ample evidence from the biblical literature and from the religious and other literature of other old-world nations that foreign ministers, ambassadors, secretaries of state, diplomats, and so on were formally trained in the wisdom tradition.

This is not to say that this international dimension of the tradition was the only purpose of the tradition. It certainly was not, and I have discussed this at-length in The Historic Wisdom Tradition and Its Literature, a two part summary review exclusive to this site. But it is a dimension of the wisdom tradition that has been quite neglected by scholarship. This article, then, introduces some of the main political actors and some the narratives in which they appear in Israel. (In the two part summary review you will find their counterparts in other nations also discussed.)

The hakamim

During the process of its political development as a monarchy state, there rose to prominence within Israel a broad class of clearly recognized high-level officials known as the hakamim (chiefly men but some women). (The Hebrew word hakamim is from a primary word for ?wise? and ?wisdom,? hkm. Hakam is used for an individual in this class; hakamim for the class itself.) Among the hakamim were professionals who served as as what today we would call cabinet ministers, policymakers, statesmen, foreign ministers, secretaries of state, diplomats, and various other kinds of political advisors. Occasionally, military and ecclesiastical figures were included in the class. [Editor's note: Hebrew words in in this article, such as hakamim and soperim (see below), are being spelled without their diacritical marks.]

In Israel, this class of officials is first heard from during the rudimentary forming of Israelite social governance and jurisprudence under Moses (see the two part summary review) and then into the period of Israel's judges. Hundred of years before Israel's flight from Egypt, however, the role of the hakamim in Egypt is hinted at in the Book of Genesis (41:33-40), when an Egyptian ruler calls the Hebrew slave Josepha as a hakam and appoints him to high-level political office akin to a secretary of commerce and a foreign minister with the authority to make and implement policy. Of Joseph, the pharaoh acknowledges before all of his ministers that they will never find anyone in the land as wise as Joseph, who will now be handling Egypt's economic policies to surrounding nations for many years to come.this class of officials is first heard from during the rudimentary forming of Israelite social governance and jurisprudence under Moses

Hints about the international role of officials trained in wisdom are also found in the government of another pharaoh, who, during an

ominous crisis, summons his hakamim in hopes of thwarting a clear and present danger from a foreign power (Exodus 7:11). Centuries later in Persia, in a delicate political matter that will decide the fate of the Queen of Persia, King Xerxes of Persia sends for his hakamim to advise him on the legal issues (Esther 1:13). Even some Israelite kings became notable for having characteristics of ?the wise,? such as David, praised for having ?wisdom like that of an angel of God,? and the proverbial Solomon, known for his ?wise and discerning? heart (2 Samuel 14:20; 1 Kings 3:12).

Other clues are also found in the biblical literature. Wise women, apparently, were occasionally numbered among the hakamim, such as in the fascinating narrative of Second Samuel 14, which describes the commission received an unnamed woman who is simply but profoundly remembered as ?a wise woman? from Tekoa. She is persuaded by Joab, king David's decorated commander-in-chief, to perform a dramatic scene before the king, who for years had been pining away over his third son, Absalom, whom David had exiled for committing fratricide to avenge a step-sister's rape. For this, the king had banished Absalom from the capital, Jerusalem, but now Joab sought to change that situation.

Enter the wise woman from Tekoa, hired by Joab to perform a one act play he hopes will awaken David's fatherly feeling toward the banished Absalom. Donning the hat of a playwright, script in hand, he has turned to a known hakam for help. That this hakam happens to be a woman I don't think is accidental, for Joab knows that for his plan to succeed he needs to get through David's masculine armor so that the king might act on his fatherly feelings and restore Absalom to Jerusalem.

The script, well-thought out and complete with choreography, calls for the woman from Tekoah to pretend she is in mourning, right down to the carefully chosen costume and lack of make-up. Her character is based on a fictitious family tragedy. After learning her lines, she appears before the king, who is quite moved by the performance. His fatherly instincts are awakened and acted on and Absalom is peaceably returned to the capital, albeit under stipulations that he cannot see the king, his father. Although the skillfully written and performed one-act play placed both Joab and the wise woman at great personal risk ?the king could have had their heads off ? it turned out to be the clever piece of politicking it was meant to be. However, it may not have had the political outcome Joab was hoping for in the end, for historians locate the narrative in a series of events culminating in a later political decision by Absalom that had grave consequences for the David's government (see the subhead ?Ahithophel,? below).

Second Samuel 20, describes ?a wise woman? (a hakam) in the besieged town of Abel Beth Maacah who negotiated a settlement with Joab that prevented his army division from destroying the town. For our purposes, here, there are a couple of revealing insights in this story. One is the deliberate prompting of Joab's memory by this woman during her negotiations. She reminds Joab that Abel Beth Maacah had, even in the lore of the still young nation, become a celebrated source for those seeking wisdom. ?Long ago they used to say,? the woman said to Joab, ?get your answer at Abel, and that settled it.? Evidently, the saying itself, as some do, had risen to the status of a proverb throughout the land. It is after she reminds Joab that she successfully negotiates the deal. The other insight is implied in a concluding remark, that ?the woman went to all the people with her wise advice,? or ?in her wisdom,? as an older translation has it. This phrase seems to have been a specialized expression which ?indicates that she was a recognized leader with professional standing, perhaps like the ?wise women' who were found in the Canaanite court, according to the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:29).? (Bernard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, 1966, p. 492.) Too, this narrative shows the cooler heads of wisdom prevailing over the hotter councils of war. It reminds me of a sage's poignant observation found in Ecclesiastes 9:13-16.

There is a wealth of narrative surrounding the hakamim in biblical literature. Here, I have commented only on a few addresses to get the ball rolling. Yet even mere introductory remarks about Israel's hakamim would be incomplete without noting their frequently strained relationships with Israel's prophets, especially during the long period following Solomon's reign, when the prophets had cause to condemn policies of the hakamim. In Isaiah 29:14-16, for instance, the statesmen of Judah are rebuked for creating policies as if they themselves were gods answerable to no one. Their polices, ironically shorthanded by the prophet as ?the wisdom of the wise,? will perish. As McKane writes, their pretensions are absurd. ?They use the grand terminology of wisdom in order to propagate their claims.? (Prophets and Wise Men, p. 70.) Isaiah, who functions as a statesman himself at times, also uses ironic criticism to inveigh against the Egyptian hakamim of his day, judging that the counsel they give pharaoh is ?senseless advice,? yet they consider themselves ?the cornerstones? of Egyptian society (Isaiah 19:11-13).

To note just one more, in a flight of sarcastic rhetoric known as a taunt-song, Isaiah 46 mocks the wise of Babylon, whose governing

wisdom lacked any sort of humility and led the state to think and act as if it were God. This assessment is not unlike a remark made by another prophet, who had concluded that in its heyday Babylon's military strength had become that nation's god in which it trusted (Habakkuk 1:11). In fact, in virtually all of the prophetic books of the Bible, unjust policies of ?the wise? are criticized or condemned.

The soperim

Equally indispensable to the running of domestic politics and international relations were the soperim, another prominent circle of high-officials who served in offices similar to those described above for the hakamim. (Soperim describes the class and is the plural of soper, which denotes a person in the class. The terms are from the Hebrew root word spr, for: count; number; declare; writing; secretary; master officer.) And from my research, it seems evident that the hakamim and the soperim were the two most prominent classes of civil and political advisors and officials in the old-world Middle East, though, here, I am using only the Hebrew language to denote those classes.

In the Christian tradition, the soperim have been singled out as ?scribes? by English translators of the Bible, and they are typically understood according to their functions in religious contexts. There is good reason for this. A soper in the biblical literature may refer to a master secretary such as Baruch (Jeremiah 36), who figures prominently in Jeremiah's life. And even outside biblical translation and exegesis, the word ?scribes? in our time has come to signify ? through films and books like The Name of the Rose ? monks in monasteries leaning over stand-up desks translating or copying old manuscripts (good book, though).

Although many soperim (scribes) in the old-world Middle East did function as writers or secretaries in religious contexts, many other held careers as political secretaries, advisors, and officials in government, such as a prominent ruler's master scribe or a royal secretary (e.g., 2 Samuel 20:25; 1 Kings 4:3; 2 Kings 18:37). The thing is, what one finds when digging into this, is not just run-of-the-mill writers, or even mere professional writers, but a class of officials trained in the kind of learning and writing requisite to careers such as a high-level political secretary would need.the hakamim and the soperim were the two most prominent classes of civil and political advisors and officials in the old-world Middle East

When referring, for instance, to Israel's political reorganization under David and Solomon, McKane, discussing international negotiations and the council of kings, writes that a soper (scribe) ?had to master foreign languages for the purposes of diplomacy, and that in doing so he acquired a knowledge of foreign literatures and assisted in their dissemination... [In both] Egypt and Babylonia wisdom is located in the circle of a high establishment which plays an important role in the political and cultural life of the time [and] these scribes have to be distinguished from mere writers. This seems to me to put the matter in the right perspective and it may not be going to far so say ... that these men, although primarily statesmen and administrators, were ?born middlemen in the international exchange of literature.? (Prophets and Wise Men, pp. 43-44.)

From his extensive research, McKane has concluded that translators who stress the ?writing? aspect, and there are many of them, have missed helping us see the more overt political careers of many soperim. That is, we should not reduce the scribes of the Bible to mere writers or clerks, for when they make their appearances in royal courts from the time of David, as many time they do, they are much more than that. They are high political officials. (?Ezra the scribe? is a notable case in point in international politics and will be considered, below.)

McKane sheds light on the fuller training and careers of the soperim by examining influences upon Israel's wisdom tradition from the Semitic language of the Akkadians, whose kingdom was part of Babylon toward the end of the third century bc. He writes that although the Akkadian words sap?ru and s?pirum (note their etymological relation to the Hebrew soper and soperim through the root spr) include the ideas of ?communicate? and ?write,? they also denote a strong notion of being entrusted with a mission, or commissioned. He continues: ?The idea of ?office' or ?managerial responsibility' rather than that of ?writing' is primary.... A s?pirum is primarily a person who holds a responsible political or administrative office.? However, ?mastery of the complicated system of cuneiform writing? was essential ?for the man who would aspire to responsible office in the state.? McKane concludes that it ?would have been impossible to discharge high political or administrative duties, whether executive or advisory, without this mastery of the involved art of written communication.? (Prophets and Wise Men, p 25.)

McKane also offer this enlightening description of how significant learning to write was for political officials in ancient Egyptian:

?Through the Egyptian people from the earliest period there ran a deep cleavage which separated him who had enjoyed a higher education from the common mass. It came into existence when the Egyptians had invented their writing, for he who mastered it, however humble his position outwardly might be, at once gained a superiority over his fellows. Without the assistance of his scribes, even the ruler was of no account and it was not without good reason that the high officials of the Old Kingdom were so fond of having themselves represented in a writing posture; for that was the occupation to which they owed their rank and power. The road to every office lay open to him who had learnt writing and knew how to express himself in well-chosen terms, and all the other professions were literally under his control.? (Quoted in Prophets and Wise Men, p. 24).

Consequently, a distinction must be kept in mind between a soper who held a high political office, such as secretary of state, and a run-of-the-mill writer. I should also note that in many biblical narratives, overlapping government functions among the soperim and the hakamim seem to be normative ? a feature of old-wold political life that precludes us from drawing too solid a line dividing their precise roles. McKane notes that ?diversity of function is a characteristic which must be expected of? both classes, for both ?belonged to an educated class whose mental habits were shaped by a common educational discipline ... particularly oriented towards the needs of the state for higher civil servants...? He even goes so far as to say that it is probable to conclude that the hakamim and soperim mentioned in Jeremiah 8:8-9 ?were wisdom teachers and that Jeremiah is pointing to what was for them a significant change of occupation.? (Prophets and Wise Men, p, 106.)

Although biblical narratives are not texts meant to detail the functions of thesoperim, they provide important clues about some of the roles of these government officials. Here are but a few. They are often included with military commanders and priests in lists of kings' officials (2 Samuel 8:17; 20:25). Sometimes their office is indicated, such as in 2 Kings 12:10, where a ?royal secretary? (soper hammelek) and the high priest cooperate in overseeing the economic aspect of major repairs to the Jerusalem temple. Similar are the descriptions in 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 24, where king Josiah's soper has the title ?royal secretary.?

Some soperim also appear to have held high military posts, such as overseeing a military draft, in passages where the relevant official could be paraphrased as the ?secretary of state for war.? (Prophets and Wise Men, p. 22. See: 2 Kings 25:19; Jeremiah 52:25.) And the Song of Deborah, whose archaic language (from probably the twelfth century before Christ) comes though the translation, describes military soperim whose authority as commanders allowed them to recruit and assemble troops for battle (Judges 5:14. Confirming McKane's point that Bible translators usually stress the meaning ?write,? the still popular King James Bible (KJB), from the early seventeenth century, translates the Hebrew of Judges 5:14 as: ?... out of Zebulun {came} they that handle the pen of the writer.? The New King James Bible (NKJB), however, from the late-1970s, more aptly has: ?those who bear the recruiter's staff,? which emphasizes the office, as does the NIV, with ?those who bear commander's staff.?)

Ezra's shuttle diplomacy

Many other government offices held by soperim appear in biblical narratives. With a little help just from one or two good word study aids ? I'm nudging you, here ? these narratives can come alive in fresh ways. One aspect that has captured my imagination is the diplomatic service of some soperim. Here is some of my own homework for you on this, surrounding an era of tense regional, multilateral relations during the reigns of several Persian kings.

The Israelites were in Babylonia, which was now under Persian rule and the Persian king Cyrus the Great had favored the exiles by issuing a royal decree authorizing the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple and freeing any Jews in exile who wished to return to Jerusalem to help in that project. Foreign policies, however, can be resisted by powerful domestic constituencies and lobbies, and such was the case after the exiles returned to Jerusalem and began implementing Cyrus's policy. Strong, and sometimes violent, political opposition from Persian nationals and others in Jerusalem frequently arose against the exiles' reconstruction efforts, which would then have to halt until a Persian administration would intervene.

It is not clear from the biblical narrative itself what political motives Cyrus and subsequent Persian administrations had for setting up the Jews back in Palestine, but it may have been in some way beneficial to Persia's ever-changing relations with Egypt. At any rate, after Cyrus's death resistance in Jerusalem to the Persian policy created political, religious, and racial turmoil in Jerusalem that demanded continual shuttle diplomacy between the three key actors: the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, the opposition groups, and the Persian kings' administrations headquartered in Babylon.

Much remains unknown about these diplomatic efforts. But we do know what has come down to us about some of them in the form of royal edicts and official letters that explain things such as desires and interests of the Persian rulers, the policies themselves, and issues and interests of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and the opposition groups. We also know that these diplomatic efforts had varying effects in Jerusalem, including temporary reversals of policy. The texts of several of these diplomatic letters and edicts are included in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. They describe the policies, and the creation of these letters would have fallen within the purview of the soperim. Beyond the creation of the letters, however, the particular narrative I want us to look at provides rare insight into the shuttle diplomacy that took place through a prominent Jewish official typically known as ?Ezra the priest,? but whose career as a scribe takes us inside the world of the soperim to reveal much about their political functions in international politics.

Ezra rose to become a key political actor in the Persian government at the end of a long period of Israelite change and reorganization under Persian rule. Despite his religious nationalism, which in another context it might be appropriate to deconstruct, but which does not concern us here, Ezra offers a good case study surrounding a political function possible for a soper who is also an ecclesiastical figure. Ezra makes a good case study of a respected and trusted ecclesiastical figure participating in successful high-level diplomatic initiatives. When we meet him in the biblical book that bears his name, he is an Israelite national serving in Artaxerxes government in Babylon, where he holds a high-profile position as a distinguished soper, having been given the rather cumbersome title ?scribe of the law of the God of heaven? (Ezra 7:12, 21, King James Bible), which could perhaps be paraphrased as ?secretary of state for Jewish affairs.? This would have been a crucial and sensitive political post at the time, for Artaxerxes and his cabinet (the seven counselors of the realm in Ezra 7:14-15) had inherited an imperial Persia that, having conquered and ruled many lands over many generations, was now experiencing political destabilization in many parts of the realm.

Artaxerxes sent Ezra to Jerusalem with a letter explaining the policy and Ezra's royal commission to implement it. He was to begin with an inquiry into life of the Israelite community in Jerusalem, with emphasis on its religious health. Artaxerxes and his cabinet (the seven counselors of the realm; Ezra 7:14-15) were already dealing with weaknesses in imperial Persian rule in other territories of the realm, and they may have feared further political destabilization between Jerusalem and its Persian rulers in Babylon. The Persian king no doubt had a huge amount of trust in Ezra, relying both on Ezra's integrity and on his reputation in Israel as a respected priest.

Ezra's commission suited his religious calling and apparently Artaxerxes policy arose because he was convinced that Ezra could guide the religious Jerusalem community into more cooperative relations with the many non-Jews who now called the city home. The commission also included organizing a huge religious celebration in Jerusalem, and Ezra was given carte blanche to raise whatever finances and help were needed to make that happen. ?Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed,? Ezra's commission read (see: 7:23), ?let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven. Why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons??

It was good political wisdom, and to ensure the peaceableness of the wider Jewish community, Ezra is empowered to go beyond Jerusalem to appoint officials who lived in that part of the realm known as Trans-Euphrates. ?And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all [the Israelites] of Trans-Euphrates ? all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them? (Ezra 7: 25). As an aside, the letter concludes with an imprimatur from Artaxerses that would be politically and religiously heretical to the regime of modern day Persia, for it affirms that Israelite obedience to Jewish religious law is sanctioned by ?the [political] law of the [Persian] king.?

One may learn many things from the narrative. Here I just want to not that although Ezra as a priest seems to have made the entire Pentateuch into a kind of constitution for the basis of law for the whole of Jewish society in Jerusalem and for the surrounding diaspora (Nehemiah 8), we have no indication that he found his religious beliefs a hindrance to holding a responsible position as a diplomat in what the Israelites of the day would have called a pagan court. Nor do we have any indication that Ezra ever sought the religious conversion of anyone in the Persian royal court. Both of these features are also found in Daniel's political career in Babylon (see Wisdom Actors, part 2 article). Foreign ministers, diplomats, and other professionals in the field of international relations and foreign policy can benefit from studying such narratives this way, through the lens of the wisdom tradition. Ezra makes a good case study of a respected and trusted ecclesiastical figure participating in successful high-level diplomatic initiatives.

"Negotiations" at the upper pool

More than 200 years before the Ezra narrative, another soper, his name is Shebna, sees negotiations break down, big time, during war. Jerusalem, at the time of King Hezekiah's government, is under imminent militarily takeover by the Assyrian king Sennacherib, and Shebna, along with two other high officials in Hezekiah's government, Eliakim (the palace administrator) and Joah (the recorder), rush from a tense, hastily called cabinet meeting to try to negotiate a settlement with Sennacherib's field commander, who is waiting impatiently with his army outside the city's walls. But negotiations are not part of the field commander's brief. Sennacherib's demands are. (2 Kings 18-19; Isaiah 36-37.)

Hezekiah had been paying tribute to Sennacherib but also rebelling against Assyrian rule, and Sennacherib's army has been on a campaign throughout Judah to end the rebellion. Fourteen of Judah's fortified cites had already fallen, and the Assyrian army is now encamped near Jerusalem. Sennacherib's field commander and Hezekiah's negotiating team meet not far from the palace, probably just outside the city's walls, where they are about to get an ear full. The speech is a virtual seminar on the diplomacy of subversion, deploying powerful rhetoric, political and religious arguments, and sound bites meant to undermine what remains of a capital whose diminished military strength has left its citizens, politicians, and king frantic before an invading army ?an army historians claim was by far the cruelest of the old-world Middle East. And it is not just Hezekiah's embassy outside the wall who are getting an earful, but the stunning speech rises to intimidate the city elders, its ecclesiastical figures, and others who are listening from the wall.

After asserting his authority to speak for his king, Sennacherib's field commander immediately reminds Hezekiah's officials of their clear military inferiority and he ridicules them for their foolishness in relying for help on international alliances or even on their God. To top it off, the field commander trots out a piece of intelligence, apparently gathered previously from spies, meant to rock the city's religious sensibilities: we have divine sanction from your God to conquer Jerusalem. (This piece of intelligence, misinterpreted though it may have been, may refer to information Sennacherib may have learned from informers with knowledge of words of the prophet Isaiah; see Isaiah 10:5-11, espec. vv 5-6.)

Now the field commander has been speaking in Hebrew, but when Shebna, Eliakim, and Joah twig to what that means, they suddenly interrupt. Stop talking in Hebrew, they complain, because your message is being understood by everyone listening on the wall. Speak in Aramaic. Come on, use the diplomatic language of the day. According to scholar Alec Motyer, this would ?enable negotiations to be carried out with a degree of secrecy.? (Alec Moyter, The Prophecy of Isaiah, 1994, p. 278.) You must be joking, the commander replies. Immediately ignoring Hezekiah's officials, he speaks in Hebrew directly to the people lining the top of the wall. He frightens them with hard facts about siege warfare, taunts them about the impotence of their king, and warns them that it is a no-brainer: surrender now and make peace with Assyria. (The entire speech is found in Isaiah 36:4-10, 12-20, and the response and outcome in Isaiah 37.)

We do not know the role Shebna the scribe played in these negotiations. The literature does explain that when the three officials reported the outcome to Hezekiah, the king went into mourning and sent them to see Isaiah the prophet, who gave them a message of hope. And in Isaiah 22:15-25, some indication is given that at one point in his career Shebna held the highest post in the palace, whether before of after the incident at the upper pool is unclear. But the verses in Isaiah do make clear that some day in the future Eliakim would replace Shebna as the one who was ?in charge of the palace.?

Other soperim

There are many scriptural references to or events involving various kinds of soperim and the kind of office each held in political and religious situations. Here I note just several other addresses, along with a few prompts, for anyone wishing to pursue further research.

During Jeremiah's time, under the reign of Judah's king Jehoiakim, who had been persecuting the prophet, a political soper named Elishama is entrusted to store an important scroll that had been dictated by the prophet to his master scribe, Baruch. The scroll's message concerned the imminent fate of the kingdom of Judah, and when it was read to the king of Judah at an impromptu cabinet meeting at his winter house, his highest officials (sarim; see below) watch horrified as their defiant king burn the scroll strip by strip as he lounges by the fire (Jeremiah 36:12-26).

In two official lists of ecclesiastical figures and leading civil and military members of king David's government during different

periods of his forty-year rule, Seraiah and Sheva are called scribes (secretaries; 2 Samuel 8:16-18; 20:23-25). In 1 Chronicles 27:32, a soper named Jonathan (see below) is named in an official list of government notables.both classes of civil and political officials, hakamim and soperim, were indispensable for advising rulers, running government bureaucracies, fostering foreign relations, and negotiating geopolitical arrangements and settlements

In King Joash's time, an unnamed soper (royal secretary) runs the finance department, along with the high priest, to raise funds for the vast reconstruction project of the Jerusalem temple. McKane believes that this royal secretary ?should probably be equated with the soper of 2 Samuel 8:17 and 20:25 and so is Joash's Secretary of State... The role of the ?Secretary' here may be an illustration of the overlapping of the functions of the civil and ecclesiastical establishments.? (Prophets and Wise Men, pp. 19-20.)

During the Babylonian pillage of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar, ?soper? is used as a title in Jeremiah 52:25 to cite a high Israelite official who held a military commission that included drafting men into the army. This official is seen as commanding at least sixty men and is mentioned in the same breath as an ?officer in charge of the fighting men, and seven royal advisors.? Thus his full title could be something like ?secretary of the field marshal.? When commenting on 2 Kings 25:19, however, which describes the same incident, McKane finds a language for this official which he concludes must be translated as ?The Secretary, Commander of the Army, which could be paraphrased as ?Secretary of State for War'? (Prophets and Wise Men, p. 22). In any case, this high military official was considered sufficiently important enough to be deported by Nebuchadnezzar, and then executed.

In summary, both classes of civil and political officials, hakamim and soperim, were indispensable for advising rulers, running government bureaucracies, fostering foreign relations, and negotiating geopolitical arrangements and settlements, as were their counterparts in neighbor nations. McKane concludes that there is ?a particular mental climate which is congenial to these soperim and hakamim; there are well-defined intellectual attitudes which they cherish in connection with the maintenance of high professional standards.? (Prophets and Wise Men, p. 46.)

I have now said a lot about elite political figures in the two classes of officials and advisors known in old-world Israel and elsewhere as the hakamim and the soperim, and I have noted that we should not draw too great a dividing line between their purposes and functions. But just before we move on I want to say that we must not think of these two classes as constituting only political officials or that the ones I have referenced or discussed were the only political ones in these two classes. I have merely introduced some of those who were relevant to my research for The Wisdom Project, and I have only discussed these two classes mainly politically.

There were many other kinds of professionals numbered among these two prominent classes of officials and administrators, who served king, nation, and people in a variety of capacities outside of politics and government, as I show in the two part summary review of the tradition. Also, as McKane points out, there is every indication that other officials serving at the highest levels of government who are not specifically identified in the biblical text as being numbered among the hakamim and the soperim were nevertheless elite figures within these classes. MacKane (pp. 40-42) cites Ahithophel (King's Councilor) and Hushai (King's Friend) as cases in point, and we will explore their policy differences and the consequence of that, below.
The mazkir, yoes, and sarim
Other Hebrew words in the Bible also convey a range of meanings to describe political officials and royal advisors who held key government positions alongside the soperim and the hakamim. Here I note just a few.

Mazkir. The word mazkir is variously translated as clerk, secretary, or recorder and denotes an office most likely held by a professional writer or skilled communicator among the ruling elite who served in a political advisory capacity. (Mazkir is from the Hebrew root word zkr, whose meanings include: remember, reflect on, commemorate, give evidence.) Joah the recorder, one of Hezekiah's three officials in the negotiations with an Assyrian field commander at Jerusalem's upper pool, is a mazkir, but it is not clear from the story whether he was a writer or verbal communicator. The title was also held by an advisor named Jehoshaphat, who may have been exceptional political figure, for his term ran for decades, through David's reign into Solomon's (2 Samuel 8:16; 1 Chronicles 18:15; 1 Kings 4:3.)

Yoes. This is an interesting word, one with significant implications for those who were classed by it. The word comes from ys, meaning: plan, counsel, advise, and is often translated as ?counselor,? as we see it is twice, for Ahithophel and Jonathon, in a list of

king David's close advisors (1 Chronicles 27:32-34). There is much more going on, here, however, with this title as it is being used to describe these two officials, but you have to dig to find it.

Briefly, the Jonathon named here is David's uncle (not the Jonathan who was David's close friend), and he is a soper. But the title he is given, yoes, to denote the kind of counselor he is known to be, means that he is a soper with exceptional insight, or wisdom, but this is not clear in the common English translation: ?a counselor, a man of insight?; or in, ?a counselor, a wise man? (KJB). The same may be said of the exceptional but tragic figure of Ahithophel, the king's councilor, though he was not also a soper. I have devoted an entire subheading to Ahithophel, below, along with Absalom and Hushai, whose name and title, ?the king's friend,? also appears in the above list. Ahithophel and Hushai were leading policymakers during David's reign whose policies diverge and collide in the end.

According to McKane, political usage of yoes depicts a high-ranking member within the decision-making body that surrounds the king. Jonathan, for instance, ?is credited with one of the fundamental virtues of the professional political advisor in that he is perspicacious or ?a man of insight'.? (Prophets and Wise Men, p. 18). Moyter occasionally sees yoes as describing someone whose counsel seems to be ?more-than-humanly gifted,? (Moyter, Prophecy of Isaiah, p. 102), such as some of Solomon's early wisdom seems to be, as well as Ahithophel's counsel, which appears to be about as close to divine as one can get without calling it prophetic. It was, indeed, exceptional political wisdom (2 Samuel 16:23). A sense of a heightened wisdom implicit in someone know as a yoes may also be seen also in the phrase ?Wonderful Counselor? (pele yoes; Isaiah 9:6) to denote a quality of Israel's future messiah-king establishing his governmental order.

All of the persons who held the political and other offices that we are considering were not elected but appointed by the kings and, though they served at the pleasure of kings, they were indispensable for well-functioning administrations. In formal lists in the Bible, some of the highest such officials are shorthanded simply as ?the wise? in English translation of the Bible when referring to a group of prominent hakamim during a certain period.

Sarim. The formal lists also use the word sarim (princes; nobles; chief officials) when classifying a king's appointed officials, who are usually named according to their offices, and in 1 Kings 4:1-6 civil, political, military, and ecclesiastical figures are among the sarim. (Sarîm is the plural of sar, meaning: official, leader, chieftain, prince, and is from the root srr, for: rule, direct, superintend.) In general, sarim ?does not refer to the Israelite king himself, but to the advisors of the king, namely, city officials, military officials, and royal officials and functionaries.? (New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis {NID}, Zondervan, 1997, vol. 3, p. 1295.) They held the kind of authority necessary to rule areas of the realm for a king, and McKane goes so far as to call them ?statesmen? (Prophets and Wise Men, p. 21).

In biblical literature they appear as key functionaries in various governing bodies of the old-world Middle East, such as in Egypt, Israel, and Persia (e.g., Genesis 12:15; 1 Chronicles 22:17; Esther 1:18), where they hold positions of political power, exercised wisely or unwisely. King Jehoiachin's sarim were among his officials who surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar and were exiled to Babylonia (2 Kings 24:10-14; Jeremiah 24:1). Sarim is the overarching title given to numerous key functionaries listed during the Davidic kingdom (1 Chronicles 28:1), and as he approached the end of his kingship David required his sarim to assist his son Solomon, heir to the throne, in the governance of Israel (1 Chronicles 22:17; see also: Ezra 7:28; 10:8; 2 Samuel 8:16-18; 20:23-25; 2 Chronicles 22:4; 25:16.)

Outside of Israel, sarim denotes various kinds of high officials, such as the advisors of a pharaoh who, enamored by the beauty of Abram's wife, Sarai, instigate a near calamitous event. The sarim of Balak, king of Moab, are crucial in negotiations meant to hire the mysterious soothsayer Balaam. Sarim of the Philistines called military commanders wisely advise Achish, ruler of the Philistine province of Gath, not to permit David (not yet king) and his fighting men to remain in the Philistine army. (Respectively: Genesis12:15; Numbers 22-23; 1 Samuel 29.)

When the father of Hanun, king of the Ammonites, dies during David's reign, David sends a delegation from Jerusalem to express his sympathy, but the nobles (sarim) of king Hanun misread David's gesture. They explain to King Hanun why it's all a shrewd deception. These are merely spies, they conclude. King Hunan falls for it and follows their counsel to treat David's ambassadors in

the most insulting manner, a decision that lead to tragic consequences for the Ammonite nation (2 Samuel 10). ?In matters of law and justice,? the seven closest counselors to the Persian king Xerxes are called both ?wise men? (hakamim) and ?nobles? (sarim) who ?had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom? (Esther 1:13-22). The soper Elishama is among the sarim listed in Jeremiah 36:12, and t he Babylonian chief official responsible for educating Daniel and his three Hebrew friends in political wisdom is a ?ar (Daniel 1:7-18; see Wisdom Actors, part 2). And we might look a bit more highly at Sarah, Abraham's wife, by calling attention to her name, which stems from ?rr and denote that she was a princess or noble lady.

Ahithophel, King's Councilor

Whereas Ezra exemplifies faithful foreign service as a shuttle diplomat, King David's renowned councilor Ahithophel is a study in political treachery and loss of reputation. The intrigue surrounding the coup d'état he executes with his influential group of conspirators would play in film today like a dramatic political thriller. (It is difficult for people who have never lived through a coup d'état to imagine how life-changing it can be.)

The tragic story of Ahithophel (2 Samuel 15-18) takes place hundreds of years before Ezra's time and is set against the backdrop of political upheaval in Israel probably toward the end of David's forty-year rule. The lead protagonist in the plot against David's government is, Absalom, David's third son, who was born to a foreign wife and is described as being very handsome and a skilled manipulator. Having gotten his bearings back in Jerusalem after his return from exile, Absalom has become a powerful political figure with many friends in high places, and so begins a clever piece of political maneuvering ? a long process of shameless self-promotion, truth be told ? through which he skillfully undermines the king's (his father's) political reputation.King David's renowned councilor Ahithophel is a study in political treachery and loss of reputation.

Enter the renowned yoes, Ahithophel, who in matters of state was the preeminent political councilor among all of David's sarim (elite officials in the cabinet that included hakamim and soperim). He was the most trusted by David and his inner circle of advisors. But Ahithophel has now joined Absalom's conspiracy, and the betrayal has unnerved David and the remaining members of his cabinet. It is important to understand why. Just as in our day, when a politician may cross the aisle to join the other side, so too in the world-world Middle East. If Ahithophel's defection meant only that sort of move, even in this situation, David and his remaining loyalists probably would not have been too rattled. What pushed them over the edge was the fact that Ahithophel's political counsel (esa) carried the remarkable distinction of being ?as if ... one should ask concerning the word (dabar) of God? (McKane's translation of 2 Samuel 16:23; Prophets and Wise Men, p. 55).

The word esa (advice, counsel) is among the words derived from the Hebrew root ys (see above) and literally means ?a plan of action, both as it is conceived in the mind and communicated to others? (NID, vol 2, p. 490). We see this usage in direct connection with political planning and policy making, as in ?Nebuchadnezzar ... has plotted (esa) against you? (Jeremiah 49:30), and in the taunt of Sennacherib's field commander: ?You say you have strategy (esa) and military strength ? but you speak on empty words? (2 Kings 18:20, Isaiah 36:5).

What McKane indicates, however, is that, evidently, Ahithophel's esa was of a caliber beyond even the council of the wisest and best-informed of David's advisors, including those in his cabinet. That is, Ahithophel's counsels among the wise were ?almost but not quite the status of the dabar {word} of God? (Prophets and Wise Men, p. 13, where McKane is citing a conclusion of OT scholar R. B. Y. Scott). Summing up the conclusion of another Old Testament scholar, Gerhard von Rad, McKane writes: ?the esa of Ahithophel was so compelling that it was more mandatory than advice; it demanded acceptance and, in assuming the authoritative character, it approximated the binding word of God? (Prophets and Wise Men, p. 13). This is the person ? his wisdom is almost on a par with a revealed word from God that a ruler would get from a prophet ? it is not prophetic guidance but nearly as reliable, and can be trusted as such ? who has crossed the aisle. With this caliber of advice now available to Absalom, David and his remaining sarim have every reason to be rattled.

Ahithophel's story now merges with Absalom's. Both will end on the same tragic note. Across the nation, Absalom has raised political dissatisfactions against David to a furious pitch, and now the final machinations are now in play as rumors of a coup are spread throughout the countryside. But these are more than rumors. Forces have now been arrayed and released that make the coup unstoppable. Absalom green-lights three previously arranged, almost simultaneous, events to now take place: he decamps from Jerusalem to Hebron with his conspirators, a cunning political move because this was the city where his father had been made king;

he sends spies to key outposts throughout the nation to collect intelligence and announce his enthronement at Hebron; and he sends for Ahithophel, who appears to have been awaiting the call from his hometown.

Why Ahithophel joined the conspirators, and when, is not indicated. As King's Councilor, however, Ahithophel should have been with David and his cabinet in Jerusalem during this crisis. That he was not, and that he appears to have been waiting hear from Absalom, seems to indicate that he had become part of the conspiracy early on. If we were to speculate about this, even if Ahithophel joined Absalom very early on, it's imaginable that Ahithophel would in all likelihood have tried to remain in Jerusalem and in the cabinet for as long as he dared, perhaps as an inside informant to Absalom. If so, it would also seem pretty reasonable that Ahithophel at some point had gotten himself excused, for whatever reason, from sitting with the cabinet before the actual coup took place, in order to await Absalom's final instructions.

Being excused from the cabinet sessions would have been an artful move, for it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for one of Absalom's operatives to get a message past David's security arrangements to reach Ahithophel with the final instructions if Ahithophel were still sitting with the cabinet. (An alternative scenario is that David discovered Ahithophel's defection and booted out of the cabinet. But that seems implausible to me. Surely David would have had Ahithophel, now a known conspirator, conspirator under guard, or executed.)

Ahithophel's seat as chief councilor to Absalom in the illegitimate government greatly strengthened Absalom's position and further emboldened the conspirators. In Hebron, Absalom is proclaimed king of Israel and begins marching on Jerusalem. David, his cabinet, and other loyalists and their families abandon the capital when news reaches them that Ahithophel is part of the coup. The pain of the betrayal struck David deeply and powerfully. The implications of this particular act of treason were so disturbing that David turns to pray: may Ahithophel's counsel to be turned into foolishness.

After Absalom and his followers take control of Jerusalem, Ahithophel proposes what seems to us today as very degraded and irrational act: Absalom should sleep with his father's concubines, to boldly let ?all Israel? know what's taken place (2 Samuel 16:20-22). In those days and in that culture, however, this was political pragmatism as its most symbolic. By publicly appropriating the king's royal harem and consummating the act (in a tent pitched on the palace roof, no less), Absalom signals to ?all Israel? that his usurpation of the throne is complete. And the act has the secondary effect of strengthening his position in the capital among any remaining doubters.

Further, this very conscious public act symbolically ends, both in Absalom's mind and in everyone else's, Absalom's filial relationship with his father. This would have been especially important for the conspirators, who would not have been able to breathe a final sigh of relief if there had been any possibility of reconciliation between Absalom and his father. Any future amity between father and son would have spelled death for the conspirators, but that door is now closed and sealed. Absalom's relationship to his father is permanently altered. Symbolically, Absalom is now no longer son but king.A small but effective intelligence network had been hastily set up by David and was being run by trusted ecclesiastical figures

The policy suggested by Ahithophel thus involved sophisticated levels of meaning understood at all levels of society. It moved Absalom beyond being just a political rival to solidify his kingly authority in the eyes of ?all Israel,? who understood the symbolism. Of course, Ahithophel also had his own survival in mind. For if the kingdom is not completely Absalom's, and if Ahithophel is not solidly in, Ahithophel is dead. With his policy enacted, Ahithophel wins, barring some sort of unpredictable intervention. Which is about to occur. For, unbeknownst to Absalom and Ahithophel, David and Hushai have been talking.

With David and his followers hiding exhausted in the countryside, the influential Ahithophel proposes another policy. The symbolic public act with the harem is not enough for Ahithophel. Absalom must now find and kill David immediately, to ensure Absalom's rule. Do a surgical strike, Ahithophel advises. Choose twelve thousand men, set out now, tonight, and strike David and his men with terror while they are weak, tired, and in hiding. But when you find them, kill only the king, for ?the death of the man you seek will mean the return of all; all the people will be unharmed.? The policy, agreed to in what would turn out to be the final cabinet meeting of Absalom's short reign, ?seemed good to Absalom and to all the elders of Israel? (2 Samuel 17:1-4).

But there is a rival councilor in the room. Hushai thinks Ahithophel is on to something, but he immediately suggests a different policy, which he puts forward so convincingly that Absalom and his cabinet, sans Ahithophel, see it as esa (2 Samuel 17:14) and decide to act on it. Hushai, however, is a loyalist from David's inner circle of counselors, planted by David in Absalom's cabinet late in the game in hopes of foiling Ahithophel's counsel.

Days earlier in the countryside beyond Jerusalem, David and his friend Hushai had been planning their own stunning piece of intrigue and deception. Hushai should return to Jerusalem and try to frustrate Ahithophel's advice. Hushai agrees and, as it happens, returns to Jerusalem just as Absalom is entering the city (2 Samuel 15:32-37). The two officials, remember, had been close colleagues, but Absalom now puts Hushai through an intense interrogation. He not only survives it but secures a seat in the illegitimate cabinet (2 Samuel 16:16-19).

To return to the final cabinet meeting, Hushai explains to Absalom that ?The advice Ahithophel has given is not good this time,? stunning everyone. And now that Hushai has their undivided attention, he continues. Forget a surgical strike, he says. It's shock and awe time. He then builds a case for what sounds like the Powell Doctrine: when going to war always employ overwhelming military force. ?Let all Israel, from Dan to Beersheba ? as numerous as the sands on the seashore ? be gathered to you, with yourself leading them into battle. Then we will attack him [David] wherever he may be found, and we will fall on him as dew settles on the ground. Neither he nor any of his men will be left alive.? The advice of Hushai, the cabinet concludes, ?is better than that of Ahithophel? (2 Samuel 17:7-14). The Powell Doctrine prevails.

The biblical text, as we expect, provides a religious answer for the rejection of Ahithophel's counsel: ?the Lord had determined to frustrate Ahithophel's good advice in order to bring disaster on Absalom? (2 Samuel 17:14; perhaps this was God answering David's prayer?). Nevertheless, there are always multiple reasons and causes for events (see Peck and Strohmer, Uncommon Sense, cpt. 11). A political answer certainly would need to include the fact that Hushai's policy must have seemed the safer of the two to Absalom, for it included killing David's cabinet ministers, who would most likely remain formidable political enemies, not to be trusted, had they followed Ahithophel's policy and killed only the king. And perhaps we could ponder, say, a psychological reason for Hushai's counsel ? a well-reasoned and argued policy that cleverly yet subtly appealed to Absalom's vanity and that of his young advisors.

We would also want to add ?intelligence gathering? to our reasons. A small but effective intelligence network had been hastily set up by David and was being run by trusted ecclesiastical figures, who in their new role as spies figure prominently in the drama and in David's eventual return to Jerusalem as restored king (2 Samuel 15:34-36). The narrative explains that Hushai would be working with this network (2 Samuel 15:35-36), and we have this specific incident recorded. Hushai rendevous with David's spies at the spring En Rogel, near Jerusalem, where they had been holed up because they could chance being caught in the city. Hushai explains Absalom's rejection of Ahithophel's policy and his acceptance of Hushai's. He then gives them a specific message for David in the wilderness. After a harrowing escape from En Rogel, reach David with Hushai's news and message (2 Samuel 17:15-22).

David has just enough time to assemble a large army, commanded by Joab and two other generals, to fight Absalom's army, led by Amasa. The civil war is short but bloody. Fought within the forest of Ephraim, it costs twenty-thousand men their lives. The turning point is Absalom's death, which scatters his army, confuses the population, and consequently leaves little for David's army to do except return David to Jerusalem and reinstate him as king. Hushai returns to a seat of prominence among the king's inner circle and Ahithophel, disgraced because his counsel had been soundly rejected (perhaps for the first time) puts his house in order and commits suicide.

Concluding remarks

Even a long introductory article on a ?new? reading of the biblical literature, as this article is, cannot escape having its downsides. For instance, people may confuse its length and detail as a comprehensive word or as the only possible approach. That would be mistaken enough, but if these same people then unwisely developed their conclusion into a formal teaching of some sort, that would be foolish indeed. The ultimate danger would be to take it and run off into a extreme view, proclaiming that one now has ?the answer.?one thing that that I find fascinatingly instructive about the historic wisdom tradition for today's situation between the United States and the Middle East is that Ezra, a practicing Jew, could serve as a high-level official in the Persian government

New discoveries can be thrilling, as this one is to me, but a central feature of the wisdom tradition is prudence, a word we don't hear

much today, let alone a virtue much practiced. So in closing this long but introductory article, I just want to remind us that it only begins to explore what I call a ?lost? aspect of the wisdom tradition of the old-world Middle East and its literature, which is it relation to the international relations of royal courts. I used broad brush strokes only, and I make no claim to providing original historical research, but to try to fairly summarize only a part, albeit a significant part, of the small amount of some of the leading scholarship currently available specifically about the political actors of the Ancient Near East. May hope has been to inspire much more of it.

Further, this article's broad brush strokes outline only some of the many and diverse political actors in the wisdom tradition and reveal only so much about them. The Bible alone indicates much else even just about these particular actors, never mind all the others and the various other approaches that may be taken to them. The typical way Christians study them is using a religious approach, which I hinted at above with brief illustrations from the prophetic tradition. But we must always remember the fuller meaning, extent, and purposes of the wisdom tradition, which adds to whatever readings of the literature one wishes to pursue. (For some of that fuller meaning, extent, and purpose, see the two part summary review of the tradition).

Finally, and to speak quite generally, one thing that that I find fascinatingly instructive about the historic wisdom tradition for today's situation between the United States and the Middle East is that Ezra, a practicing Jew, could serve as a high-level official in the Persian government. This is in great contrast to what is permitted by the Iranian regime of today, which is often quick to note that its Persian identity should not be confused with the Arab identity of neighborhood states. Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, when Iran became constitutionally an Islamic Republic, only a Muslim male may hold a position of political power. If an equivalent religious determinacy had existed in the government of ancient Persia, Ezra would not have found a career in that government. There's a strange political irony, here, in that a citizen's opportunity to hold elected political office in America, with its pluralist Western democratic structure, corresponds to the setup in ancient Persia in a way that the Islamic Republic of Iran does not. (For a look at a tentative attempt to apply some of the wisdom ideas and norms introduced in the two part summary review of the tradition to the international scene today, see Five Norms of Wisdom for Thinking about More Cooperative Relations between the United States and the Muslim Middle East.)

Finally, a similar political pluralism to Persia's existed in Babylon, where Daniel rose to unprecedented positions of political authority in that government even though he was a devout Jew. I believe his career is hugely instructive, both for understanding the wisdom tradition in the old-world Middle East and for unpacking more of its lost potential for pursuing alternative wisdom-based ways of approaching today's pluralist international relations. And for that, interested readers may see the major article on Daniel.

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