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**NILI SAMET,**  
**“THE TALLEST MAN CANNOT REACH HEAVEN;  
THE BROADEST MAN CANNOT COVER EARTH” –  
RECONSIDERING THE PROVERB AND ITS  
BIBLICAL PARALLELS**

## “THE TALLEST MAN CANNOT REACH HEAVEN; THE BROADEST MAN CANNOT COVER EARTH.” RECONSIDERING THE PROVERB AND ITS BIBLICAL PARALLELS

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### INTRODUCTION

Ancient Near Eastern thought, like many ancient and modern philosophies, was concerned with the problem of the limits of human ability. This issue, treated in numerous texts and expressed in varied literary forms, finds a most intriguing expression in a short proverb, “The tallest man cannot reach heaven; the broadest man cannot cover earth.”

Various versions of this proverb, widespread in ancient Near Eastern texts, have been collected by scholars over the last fifty years.

### HISTORY OF RESEARCH

The first scholar to recognize this proverb was Wilfred George Lambert, who pointed to its occurrence in the so called “Dialogue of Pessimism.”<sup>1</sup> Lambert identified two Sumerian parallels, noting additionally that the proverb is based upon a broader Mesopotamian conception, according to which greatness is expressed in terms of filling the whole cosmos, from underworld to heaven. The first reference to a biblical parallel appears in a short remark by Gerhard von Rad in his 1966 commentary on Deut 30:11–14.<sup>2</sup> In 1968, Jean Nougayrol commented on another biblical example in Job 11:8.<sup>3</sup> An additional Sumerian parallel was identified by William Hallo in his 1990 paper about proverbs quoted in epic.<sup>4</sup> A signifi-

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<sup>1</sup> W.G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 327.

<sup>2</sup> G. von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (OTL; trans. D. Barton; London: SCM, 1966), 184.

<sup>3</sup> J. Nougayrol, “Textes suméro-accadiens des archives et bibliothèques privées d’Ugarit,” *Ugaritica* 5 (1968), 295.

<sup>4</sup> W.W. Hallo, “Proverbs Quoted in Epic,” T. Abusch et al. (eds), *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 216. See also Hallo’s earlier note in his article “New Viewpoints on Cuneiform Literature,” *IEJ* 12 (1962), 20,

cant step forward was achieved in a 1994 article by Frederick Greenspahn, who collected numerous instances of the proverb in ancient Near Eastern literature and in the Bible, and discussed its implications for the understanding of the Tower of Babel story.<sup>5</sup> Another review of the occurrences of this proverb was suggested in 1997 by Raymond van-Leeuwen, who connected it to the proverb “who has ascended the heaven and descended?” (Prov 30:4).<sup>6</sup> Van Leeuwen discussed the broader background for the proverb, distinguishing three different topoi associated with it: the topos of cosmic stature spanning heaven and earth; the topos of inaccessible divine knowledge; and the topos of the ability to ascend and descend between heaven and earth. Recently, Edward Greenstein discussed the proverb in regard to the wisdom poem in Job 28.<sup>7</sup> Greenstein speaks of two models of wisdom underlying the proverb: the heavenly model, according to which wisdom is located up in heaven, and the model of depth, which assumes that it is to be found under the earth; in most cases, the two models are combined together. The present paper seeks to re-examine the different manifestations of the proverb, and to trace the development of the topoi reflected in it, focusing especially on their adaptation in the Bible. This examination will take into account the previously identified occurrences, along with some new instances.

### SUMERIAN EXAMPLES

The most ancient versions of the proverb are found in Sumerian literature.<sup>8</sup> In the Sumerian myth Gilgamesh and Huwawa, the protagonist, Gilgamesh, uses the proverb to describe the frustrating mortality of human beings, including himself, motivating him to set off to the remote mountains to achieve eternal fame:

lu<sub>2</sub> sukud-ra<sub>2</sub> an-še<sub>3</sub> nu-mu-un-da-la<sub>2</sub>/ lu<sub>2</sub> daġal-la kur-ra la-ba-an-šu<sub>2</sub>-šu<sub>2</sub>/ murgu ġuruš-e til<sub>3</sub>-la saġ til<sub>3</sub>-le-bi-še<sub>3</sub> la-ba-ra-an-e<sub>3</sub>-a/ kur-ra ga-an-kur<sub>9</sub> mu-ġu<sub>10</sub> ga-am<sub>3</sub>-ġar, “Even the tallest one cannot reach heaven; even the widest one cannot cover the

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note 33.

<sup>5</sup> F.E. Greenspahn, “A Mesopotamian Verb and its Biblical Reverberations,” *JAOs* 114 (1994), 33–38.

<sup>6</sup> R.C. Van Leeuwen, “The Background of Proverbs 30:4a,” M. L. Barré (ed.), *Wisdom, You Are My Sister: Studies in Honor of Ronald E. Murphy* (CBQMS, 29; Washington DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1997), 102–133.

<sup>7</sup> E.L. Greenstein, “The Poem on Wisdom in Job 28 in Its Conceptual and Literary Contexts,” E. van Wolde (ed.), *Job 28: Cognition in Context. Biblical Interpretation* (Leiden: Boston, MA: Brill, 2003), 253–280.

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise stated, Sumerian literary works are referred to according to their titles and line numbers in ETCSL. (J. A. BLACK et al, *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*. n.p. [cited 24 September 2009]. Online: <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>).

underworld.<sup>9</sup> Since a man cannot pass beyond the final end of life, I shall set off into the mountain land, I shall establish my renown there” (Gilgameš and Huwawa, Version A, ll. 28–31).<sup>10</sup>

A different version of the proverb is found in two Sumerian proverb collections:

rsukud<sub>1</sub>-de<sub>3</sub> an-na šu nu-um-[da-la<sub>2</sub>]/ rdaġal<sub>1</sub>-e ki-a nu-um-ma-an-il<sub>2</sub>-il<sub>2</sub>/ rkalag<sub>1</sub>-ga ki-nu<sub>2</sub> ni<sub>2</sub> nu-mu-un-gid<sub>2</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>/ [za]-re<sub>1</sub>-me-en ud-gin<sub>7</sub> dug<sub>4</sub>-dug<sub>4</sub>-ga/ rpiriġ<sub>1</sub>-gin<sub>7</sub> ne he<sub>2</sub>-gub, “Even the tallest one cannot str[etch] his hand unto heaven. Even the broadest one cannot lift (oneself) on earth.<sup>11</sup> The strongest one cannot even stretch himself fully over his bed. But [you], who roar like a storm – may you establish yourself like a lion” (Sumerian Proverbs, Collection 17, segment B, ll. 4–8).

A very similar version appears in another proverb collection:

sukud-ra<sub>2</sub> an-na šu nu-um-la<sub>2</sub>/ daġal-e ki-in-du rla<sub>1</sub>-[ba]-an-šu<sub>2</sub>-šu<sub>2</sub>/ [kalag]-rga<sub>1</sub> ki-nu<sub>2</sub> rni<sub>2</sub> nu<sub>1</sub>-mu-un-gid<sub>2</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>/ [za-e]-me-en [ud]-rgin<sub>7</sub> dug<sub>4</sub>-dug<sub>4</sub>-ga rpiriġ<sub>1</sub>-gin<sub>7</sub> ni<sub>2</sub> he<sub>2</sub>-gub, “Even the tallest one cannot stretch his hand unto heaven. Even the broadest one cannot cover the whole earth. The strongest one cannot even stretch himself fully over his bed. But [you] who roar like a [storm] – may you establish yourself like a lion” (Sumerian Proverbs, Collection 22, ll. 203–206).

Due to the absence of context, the identity of the addressee of the final sentence “But [you] who roar like a storm – may you establish

<sup>9</sup> While the Sumerian term *kur* could also mean “mountains,” I opted for “underworld,” which seems to fit the context better. Cf. the Akkadian parallel *anṣanunzē*, appearing in one of the Akkadian versions of the proverb (see the example from *Ludlul bel nemeqi* below). Note that D. Edzard translated here “die ganze Erde;” but in such case one would expect *kur-kur* rather than *kur* (see D.O. Edzard, “Gilgameš and Huwawa A. I. Teil,” *ZA* 80 [1990], 184, l. 29).

<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that the proverb echoes also in the Old Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh epic, where Gilgamesh explains his aspiration to fight Humbaba in the following words: “who is there, my friend, that can climb to the heaven? Only the gods have [dwelled] forever with the sun. As for man, his days are numbered. Whatever he might do, it is but wind” (see A.R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* [Oxford: University Press, 2003], 200, ll. 140–143). While this version does not preserve the proverb in its full form, it still refers to the inability of human beings to reach heaven as an illustration of their mortality. On the motif of human ascent to heaven in general see further Van Leeuwen, “Background,” 111–121.

<sup>11</sup> The use of the Sumerian verb *il<sub>2</sub>* regarding the horizontal dimension is somewhat problematic. ETCSL suggests the emendation <igi> nu-um-ma-an-il<sub>2</sub>-il<sub>2</sub>, “No one is broad enough to lift his gaze over the whole earth.”

yourself like a lion” is unknown,<sup>12</sup> yet it is likely to refer to a divine being of some kind, stressing the contrast between limited humans and the mighty ones, whomever they might be, who have divine powers.

In these occurrences of the proverb in the Sumerian literature, it conveys the general idea of the supremacy of gods versus the inferiority of mortals, manifesting itself in the mortality of human beings and in their limited physical size.

The proverb occurs also in two Sumerian compositions, both of which elaborate on the idea that ‘all is vanity’: one known by the name Niĝ<sub>2</sub>-nam nu-kal, “nothing is of value,” and the other is usually referred to as the Ballade of Early Rulers:

sukud-da an-na-še<sub>3</sub> nu-mu-un-da-la<sub>2</sub>/ rlu<sub>2</sub> daĝal-la kur-ra la-ba-šu<sub>2</sub>-šu<sub>2</sub>/ kalag-ga ki-a ni<sub>2</sub> nu-mu-un-gid<sub>2</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>, “Even the tallest one cannot reach heaven; even the widest one cannot cover the underworld; Even the strongest one cannot stretch himself over the earth” (Niĝ<sub>2</sub>-nam nu-kal version A. ll. 5–7).<sup>13</sup>

an su<sub>3</sub>-ud-da-gin<sub>7</sub> šu-ĝu<sub>10</sub> sa<sub>2</sub> bi<sub>2</sub>-in-dug<sub>4</sub>-ga/ ki buru<sub>3</sub>-da-gin<sub>7</sub> na-me nu-mu-un-zu-a/ nam-ti-la du<sub>3</sub>-a-bi x igi-niĝ<sub>2</sub>-na-kam, “Like the remote heavens, has my hand ever reached them? Like the deep underworld,<sup>14</sup> no one knows them – All life is vanity” (The Ballade of Early Rulers, standard Sumerian version, ll. 16–18).<sup>15</sup>

The general message of the Sumerian essay Niĝ<sub>2</sub>-nan nu-kal, as reflected in its name, is that life is meaningless. A similar view is suggested by the Ballade of Early Rulers, which mentions ancient heroes and rulers who all perished in spite of their greatness. Subsequently, both compositions present the notion of *carpe diem*. Thus, the proverb expresses yet again the idea of the inferiority, and even the insignificance, of human achievements. However, the context might also point to a slightly different message, namely, the idea that humans cannot understand the meaning of life.

If this connotation can be found in these two Sumerian compositions, then they function as predecessors of later wisdom texts,

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<sup>12</sup> Note that in the current state of preservation of the proverb, it is not even certain that the last sentence is to be interpreted as speaking in the second person.

<sup>13</sup> See: B. Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL, 2005), 270.

<sup>14</sup> Due to the use of the Sumerian adjective buru<sub>3</sub>, “deep,” I translated the term ki as “underworld,” as opposed to the previous examples, in which I opted for the more common meaning “earth.” For the similar problem regarding the Akkadian term *eršetu* cf. discussion below.

<sup>15</sup> See Alster, *Wisdom*, 303; cf. also the Akkadian version of the same poem: *kīma šamū nīquma qāti mamma ikašša [d]/ kīma šupul eršeti mimma lā idū/ balāṭa kalāšu* (see *ibid*).

which explicitly ascribe such a new meaning to the proverb under discussion. In the classic wisdom literature written in Akkadian, the proverb is utilized to express not only the general distinction between human and divine, but more specifically, the notion of the remoteness of divine *wisdom*, the key for understanding the secrets of the universe, from humankind. In other words, whereas the classic Sumerian literature focused on the physical limitations of humans, the Akkadian wisdom literature, perhaps with some Sumerian predecessors, focused on their conceptual limits<sup>16</sup>.

### AKKADIAN EXAMPLES

An Akkadian version of the proverb appears in the seventh-century dialogue between a master and his slave, often referred to as the “Dialogue of Pessimism.” In this classic wisdom composition, the proverb appears in the concluding passage, declaring that all is vanity:

*ājju arku ša ana šamê ellû/ ājju rapšu ša eršetim ugammeru,*  
 “Who is so tall as to ascend to the heavens? Who is so broad  
 as to compass the underworld?”<sup>17</sup> (Dialogue of Pessimism ll.  
 82–83).<sup>18</sup>

Apparently, the proverb is used here ironically, probably mocking the entire concept of acquiring wisdom, or finding the meaning of life.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the sense of the proverb is still wisdom-oriented, i.e., it expresses the idea of the inaccessibility of wisdom. Another Akkadian exemplar of the proverb appears in the peripheral Akkadian version of the Sumerian Ballade of Early Rulers quoted above.

The wisdom-oriented interpretation of the proverb in its Akkadian contexts is supported by additional variations on the same theme in other wisdom compositions. In the famous wisdom poem *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*, the pious sufferer describes the human failure to understand the gods’ concept of good and evil in the following words:

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<sup>16</sup> As mentioned above, a similar distinction among three different topoi of the proverb is made by Van Leeuwen, “Background.”

<sup>17</sup> The translation “earth” (for *eršetu*) is also possible; I opted for “underworld” due to the use of the unequivocal term *anzanunzē* in the next example. Note the somewhat similar ambiguity regarding the Sumerian terms employed to designate the earth and/or the underworld (see discussion above).

<sup>18</sup> See Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 148–149.

<sup>19</sup> See: E.A. Speiser, “The Case of The Obliging Servant,” *JCS* 8 (1954), 98–105; N. Samet, “The Babylonian Dialogue between a Master and His Slave: a New Literary Analysis,” *Sbnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Near Eastern Studies* 23 (2008), 99–130.

*ājjū tēm ilī qereb šamē ilammad/ milik ša anzanunzē ihak-  
kim mannu*, “Who knows the plans of the gods in heaven?  
Who understands the counsel of the underworld gods?” (*Lud-  
lul bēl nēmeqi* ll. 36–37).<sup>20</sup>

A similar statement, referring to heaven only, is made by the fellow of another pious sufferer, in the wisdom literary work known as the Babylonian Theodicy:

*[I]ibbi ilī kīma qereb šamē nesima/ lēassu šupšūqatma*, “the divine  
[m]ind, like the centre of the heavens, is remote, knowledge of  
it is very difficult” (the Babylonian Theodicy ll. 256–257).<sup>21</sup>

The last two examples demonstrate that the conception of associating human limitedness with the boundaries of the world is not restricted to a single proverbial expression. As it will be shown, this is especially true regarding the biblical exemplars, which vary in form and genre. No exact quotation of the proverb, as known from the Mesopotamian literature, is found in the Bible. Yet, the use of human inability to access the extremities of the universe as an illustration of human limitations in general occurs in several biblical passages. While the striking similarities between these biblical quotes and the Mesopotamian examples clearly point to a common origin, the short proverbial form is not preserved in the Bible. I will therefore prefer to use such inclusive terms as “topos” or “concept” in regard to the biblical parallels discussed below.

### BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

The concept of world boundaries serving as an analogue for human limitations stands at the background of the artfully designed rhetorical passage in Deuteronomy 30:

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too wondrous for you, nor is it too distant. It is not in heaven, that you might say, “Who will ascend to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you might say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” (Deut 30:11–14).

Two striking parallels occur in the book of Job. The first appears in Zophar’s first speech:

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<sup>20</sup> See: A. Annus and A. Lenzi, *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi, The Standard Babylonian Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* (SAACT, VII; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 20.

<sup>21</sup> See Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 86–87.

Can you find out the mystery of God? Can you find out the end of Shaddai? How can you affect the highest heaven? How can you know what is deeper than Sheol? Its measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea. (Job 11:7–9).

A second example from the book of Job is found in the “wisdom poem” in chapter 28:

Where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Mortals do not know the way to it, and it is not found in the land of the living. The Deep says ‘It is not in me,’ and the sea says ‘It is not in me’... God understands the way to it, He knows its source... and He said to Man: See! Fear of Lord is wisdom; to shun evil is understanding.” (Job 28:12–28).

An additional interesting parallel appears in Ps 139:

Where can I get away from your spirit? Or where can I flee from you presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there, and if I make my bed in Sheol – you are there too. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limit of the sea – even there your hand shall lead me, your right hand shall hold me fast” (Ps 139:8–10).<sup>22</sup>

The book of Amos uses the same topos for somewhat similar purposes:

If they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; if they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down; if they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search out and take them; and if they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, from there I will command the serpent and it shall bite them. (Amos 9:2–3).

Amos’s use of the world boundaries topos calls to mind a very similar extra-biblical parallel, occurring in an Amarna letter:

*šumma nitelle ana šamê/ šumma nurrad ina eršeti/ u rēšunu ina qātēka*, “Should we go up to the heavens or should we go down to the underworld, our heads are still in your hands” (Amarna Letter 264,18–19).<sup>23</sup>

Aside from these excerpts, the association of human limitedness with the inaccessibility of the edges of the cosmos appears also in some additional, less explicit biblical parallels. Compare the following instances: “The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but he has

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<sup>22</sup> The possibility should not be excluded, that the use of the phrase “if I make my bed,” being somewhat odd in this connection, is somehow indirectly connected with the image of lying on bed appearing in the some of the Sumerian versions of the proverb (see above).

<sup>23</sup> See: W.L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 313.

given the earth to man” (Ps 115:15–16); “Who has ascended to heaven and come down?” (Prov 30:4);<sup>24</sup> “for God is in heaven, and you upon earth” (Qoh 5:1); “If the heaven above could be measured, and the foundations of earth below examined” (Jer 31:36). Additionally, this topos seems to echo in the stories of the Tower of Babel and of Jacob’s dream,<sup>25</sup> and perhaps also in the mythical description of the fall of הַיְלֵל בְּנִשְׁחָר from heaven in Isa 14:13–14.

### THE ADAPTATION OF THE TOPOS IN THE BIBLE

To be sure, these occurrences of the concept of associating world boundaries with human limitation in the Bible point yet again to its popularity in the ancient Near East in general. At the same time, however, the biblical exemplars also reveal certain special characteristics, which might shed light on some unique biblical conceptions.

First, the biblical versions of the topos under discussion have their own emphases in defining the boundaries of the cosmos. The Sumerian and Akkadian exemplars display a bipartite portrait of the world, consisting of the pairs heaven-earth or heaven-underworld. The biblical exemplars include an additional component: the sea. In some instances, the sea is added to two other components, with a resultant tripartite world-view of earth-underworld-sea (Job 28:12–28) or heaven-underworld-sea (Ps 139:8–10). In other instances, a four-part image is presented, including heaven, underworld, earth, and sea (Job 11:7–9), or heaven, underworld, mountain and sea, (Amos 9:2–3). In one case a bipartite worldview is suggested, with the sea replacing the earth or the underworld in the heaven-sea pair (Deut 30:11–14).

This biblical addition of the sea as a further realm defining the boundaries of the world is probably due to the different geographic landscape of the land of Israel. The Mesopotamian who looked around him in search of the world’s ends saw a typical landscape of heaven, earth and rivers, which he envisioned to be connected with the underworld. His Israelite counterpart saw heaven, earth, and sea.<sup>26</sup>

It should be stressed that one is dealing here with two different landscape images, not with two different cosmological concepts. The traditional Mesopotamian cosmology, as reflected in the classical literature, does include the sea in its world portrait.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the idea of crossing a sea in order to gain special knowledge is not unknown to Mesopotamian mythology.<sup>28</sup> Yet, the to-

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<sup>24</sup> See Van Leeuwen, “Background.”

<sup>25</sup> See Greenspahn, “Mesopotamian Proverb,” 35–38.

<sup>26</sup> Perhaps a similar explanation can be given for the appearance of the mountain in Amos 9:2–3.

<sup>27</sup> See: W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 332–333; 340–342.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. the journey by Gilgamesh to reveal Utnapishtim’s secrets of

pos under discussion, finding its most prominent Mesopotamian expression in a popular proverb, seems to reflect the immediate geographical experience of the ordinary person, rather than abstract cosmological or mythological ideas.

The adaptation of this topos to the Israelite environment is not restricted to the physical-geographical sphere, as shown in the following review of its different meanings in the Hebrew context.

It should first be noted, that in most cases, the biblical use of this topos is wisdom-oriented, i.e., the Bible often focuses on the question of the accessibility of *wisdom* to human beings. Thus, not surprisingly, the biblical exemplars are similar to their contemporary Akkadian instances. However, at least two examples seem to refer to the relation between human beings and God in general, not having a specific wisdom focus. I shall discuss each group of instances separately.

In Job 11, Zophar seems to utilize this topos for purposes similar to those of classic Akkadian wisdom literature. God's wisdom is declared to be higher than heaven, deeper than Sheol, longer than the earth and broader than the sea, and therefore Job cannot achieve it. Aside from the figurative use of the typically concrete components heaven, Sheol, earth and sea, Zofar does not seem to suggest any novelty; he basically agrees with the traditional view of the Mesopotamian wisdom literature, concluding that wisdom is inaccessible.

Nevertheless, in Job 28 the same topos occurs again, this time in a new framework. After the traditional description of the inaccessibility of wisdom, which is reachable only by God, the concluding verse states that actually there exists a way in which humans can have access to wisdom, if not in its transcendent manifestation, then in its moral form: "and He said to Man: See! Fear of Lord is wisdom; to shun evil is understanding." This final verse suggests a new way to deal with the problem of the inaccessibility of wisdom: replacing the philosophical quest with an ethical one.<sup>29</sup>

Some scholars, who noticed the sudden change of concept in the last verse, and the unusual use of the divine epithet **יְיָ**, which occurs only here in Job, suggested that it is a later addition.<sup>30</sup> If this assumption is correct, then one witnesses here not only an Israelite new notion about acquiring wisdom, but also the very process of

immortality, which included crossing of the sea. See George, *Gilgamesh Epic*, 678–698.

<sup>29</sup> Note that the issue of the exact nature of the wisdom described in the Wisdom Poem is disputed. Some scholars would not agree with our understanding of v. 28 as conveying the idea of making the divine wisdom accessible to human beings by changing its character. For a recent survey of the different opinions see C.A. Newsom, "Re-Considering Job," *Currents in Biblical Research* 5 (2007), 161–165.

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. M.H. Pope, *Job* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; AB, 15; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 206.

adaptation that produced this final product. The apparent addition of the last verse as the climax of the wisdom poem changes the traditional meaning of the world boundaries topos, suggesting instead a new concept: to look for wisdom in the human realm rather than in the divine territory.

The same idea is expressed in Deut 30:11–14, which explicitly contrasts the classic wisdom concept regarding unapproachable wisdom with the Deuteronomistic “commandment.” As opposed to wisdom, the commandment is neither too wondrous nor too distant. Here too, the solution to the problem of remote wisdom appears to replace the interest in the transcendent sphere with pious activity in the human realm. The world boundaries topos is therefore used here to elaborate on the idea previously expressed at the end of chapter 29: “the secret things belong to the Lord our God, and those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.”<sup>31</sup>

As mentioned above, some of the biblical parallels do not appear in a wisdom context. These cases need to be addressed. The examples from Ps 139:8–10 and from Amos 9:2–3 both seem to express the omnipotence of God, whose hand reaches the ends of the world. These examples are most comparable to the paraphrase in the Amarna letter, which attributes similar abilities to the Pharaoh.

Nevertheless, the passage from Ps 139:8–10 seems yet again to utilize the world boundaries topos in order to express a new theological idea, different from its traditional message. The psalmist does not mention the heaven, underworld and sea in order to demonstrate the remoteness of God from human beings, but, to the contrary, in order to stress the closeness and even intimacy between the two. The statement “even there your hand shall lead me, your right hand shall hold me fast” exposes a distinctive viewpoint of the psalmist regarding the kind of relationship that exists between human beings and God.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, whereas the some of the biblical wisdom passages reinterpret the topos under discussion, suggesting a philosophical innovation, the psalmist presents its innovation in the realm of the emotional relationship with God.

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<sup>31</sup> For the relationship of Deuteronomy to the wisdom literature cf. e.g. M. Weinfeld, “The Dependence of Deuteronomy upon the Wisdom Literature,” M. Haran (ed.) *Yehezkel Kaufmann Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem: Y. L. Magnes Press, 1960) 89–108; idem, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 244–281.

<sup>32</sup> For the distinguished biblical conception concerning nearness to God as reflected in Psalms, cf. M. Greenberg, *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995) 75–108.

### APOCRYPHAL EXAMPLES

Finally, several Apocryphal occurrences of the topos under discussion point to its extraordinarily long life. Some of these occurrences appear in a wisdom context, conveying a message similar to that known to us from the classic biblical wisdom literature. Other instances appear in a new eschatological framework.

The apocryphal utilization of the world boundaries topos for traditional wisdom purposes is well represented by a passage from the prologue of the book of Sirach:

All wisdom is from the Lord God, and is with him forever... The height of Heaven, the breadth of the earth, the deep, and wisdom – who can find them out?... To whom has the root of wisdom been revealed? Or who has known her wise counsels?... There is but one who is wise, greatly to be feared, seated upon his throne – the Lord” (Sir 1:3–8).

A similar message appears in *4 Ezra*, in a dialogue between the angel and Ezra regarding the human inability to solve the problem of theodicy:

And he said to me, If I should ask you how great dwellings are in the midst of the sea, or how many springs are in the source of the deep, or how many springs are above the firmament, or which are the exits of the Sheol, or which are the outgoings of paradise, perhaps you would have said to me, I never went down into the deep, nor as yet into Sheol, neither did I ever climb up into heaven, nor have I entered Paradise” (*4 Ezra* 4:7–8).

In other apocalyptic compositions, on the other hand, the traditional notion of this topos is merged into a broader concept regarding the existence of secret knowledge revealed only to seers or to the elected righteous.<sup>33</sup> A discussion of this later apocalyptic conception is beyond the scope of the present article.<sup>34</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that the apocalyptic texts reinterpret the world boundaries topos, suggesting a new meaning, which is different from its biblical one. In accordance with the apocalyptic point of view, the secrets of the cosmos are said to be inaccessible only by ordinary people. The elected righteous, on the contrary, is enabled to access them via revelation.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See e.g. 1 Enoch 93:11–14.

<sup>34</sup> For an extensive discussion of the post biblical examples in their eschatological context see: M.E. Stone, “Lists of Revealed Things in Apocalyptic Literature,” W.E. Miller et al. (eds.) *Magnalia Dei: the Mighty Acts of God. Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976) 414–452.

<sup>35</sup> See *ibid.*

In this review of the development of a topos both historically and geographically widespread, I have shown some of the different ways in which it was molded by different schools, genres and cultures seeking to adjust it to their different viewpoints. It might serve as a test case pointing yet again to the close relation between the Bible and ancient Near Eastern traditions on the one hand, and to the uniqueness of each culture on the other hand.