

Chronology of wisdom literature in the Western tradition

This Chronology is not complete and may to an extent be misleading, but will identify many of the key contributions to wisdom literature. It does not yet go beyond 1700CE other than to mention a couple works. Readers are requested to suggest additions to this list, and by all means to notify me of any errors. There are undoubtedly some!

That this chronology juxtaposes quite disparate writings may raise an eyebrow or cause a smile, but all things in due time. There does not seem to exist a comprehensive overview of the concept of wisdom, either globally or in the West. Of course, wisdom has been used in such varying senses that a primary task would seem to be to specify what criteria the historian is using to include a work of literature, or historic example, in his account. In his anthology, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, W. G. Lambert (1960:1) pointed out that “‘Wisdom’ is strictly a misnomer as applied to Babylonian literature. . . . used for a group of texts which correspond in subject-matter with the Hebrew Wisdom books.”

The criterion for inclusion in this Chronology is that the author discusses wisdom itself (although this does not hold for the sages of the ancient Near East), or at least describes or defines wisdom in significant (perhaps detailed) manner. Authors who do not describe wisdom explicitly may be included if their use of the concept reveals a definite, although implicit, understanding of wisdom. Once what has been said about wisdom has been gathered together, the task of sorting out what wisdom has meant to human beings, and how that understanding has varied according to time and place, can be taken up. The first step might be to distinguish those writings that consist solely of revelations on wisdom and lack a reflective element. As at this time, the Chronology is still a “first round”, an initial examination of the literature, the criterion is subject to refinement, and I have not always followed it strictly.

Wisdom has usually been considered to signify an ultimate achievement for a human being, or rather a particular sort of ultimate, involving knowledge, judgment, and character. It signified the highest value, or at least, the highest virtue. The fact that it was of central importance to thoughtful people in the West for so many centuries, until the last two or three centuries in fact, and that over the past fifty years a renewed interest in wisdom has steadily grown, indicates that a thorough investigation of human interest in and insights into wisdom would be useful. It might provide a particularly valuable perspective on our options at a time when the choices humans make will determine the fate of our planet. Contemporary understandings of the universe are markedly different from those of earlier writers on wisdom, but the search for insight into priorities and optimal choices is the same. For the past couple centuries we have grown unaccustomed to bother with this search, but it seems to be urgent at the moment, and our need for wisdom may become more pressing before long. In this need, key insights and methods might be found in the heritage of wisdom literature.

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c2600-c600 BCE Mesopotamian, including Sumerian, Old Babylonian, Akkadian, Cassite, and Assyrian.
Roughly, from *Instructions of Shuruppak* to *The Words of Ahiqar*.

c2500-c100 BCE Egyptian, roughly, from *Instructions of Hardjedef* to the *Papyrus Insinger*.

c600-c150 BCE Jewish, *Job*, *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes* (and to lesser extent other sections of the Tanakh);
Ecclesiasticus and *Book of Wisdom* (Apocrypha).

469-399 Socrates. See Xenophon, *Memorabilia*; Plato, *Apology*

c450 Perictione. On wisdom. (fragments in Stobaeus III.I.120-121).

427-347 Plato. *Republic*, *Apology*, *Protagoras*, etc.

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- 384-322 Aristotle. *Metaphysics, Nicomachean Ethics*, etc.
- c300 Pythagorica. *Carmen Aureum*.
- c106- 43 Marcus Tullius Cicero. *De Officiis, Tusculanae Disputationes*, etc.
- c20BCE-50CE Philo of Alexandria.
- 4BCE-65CE Lucius Annaeus Seneca. *De Constantia Sapientis, Epistolae Morales, De Tranquillitate Animi, De Vita Beata*
- c60-c150 *New Testament* (particularly Gospels, 1Cor, Ep. James)
- c130-c202 Irenaeus. *Against the Heresies*, “Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching”.
- c150-c215 Clement of Alexandria. *Stromata*.
- 185-254 Origen. *Philokalia*. Commentariorum in Evangelium Ioannis (PG14).
- flca230 Gregory Thaumaturgos. Oratio Panegyrica in Origenem (PG10:1051-1104).
- 204-270 Plotinus. *Enneads* (particularly, I believe, I.2,3,46; IV.4; V.1,8)
- 3rd c? *Sophia Jesu Christi*.
- 3rdc? *Hermetica*
- c300? *Pirkei Avoth* (Hebrew: Chapters of the Fathers, תובא יקרפ).
- c240 – c320 Lactantius. *Divinae Institutiones*, (esp. books III: de falsa sapientia & IV: de vera sapientia et religione).
- 339-397 Ambrose of Milan. *On the Duties of Prelates, De Paradiso, De excessu fratris Satyrus*.
- 354-430 Augustine of Hippo. *De Trinitate, Enchiridion de Fide, Spe, et Charitate, De Beata Vita*.
- c450 Salonius Viennensis. *In Ecclesiasten Expositio Mystica*.
- c500 Dionysius Areopagiticus (Pseudo-Dionysius). *De Divinis Nominibus. De Mystica Theologia*.
- c500 Fabius Planciades Fulgentius, *De Continentia Vergiliana*.
- 480-524/5 Boethius, Anicius Manlius Severinus. *Consolatio Philosophiae*.
- c480-543 Benedict of Nursia. *Regula*.
- c515-579/80 Martin of Braga. *Formula Vitae Honestae [De Quattuor Virtutibus, opusculum]*.
- flc600 Gregorius Magnus. *Moralia* (Expositio in Librum Beati Job), *Regula Pastoralis*.
- 780-856 Rabanus Maurus. *De rerum naturis. Commentaries* on the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus, & Wisdom.
- 1033- 1109 Anselmus Cantuariensis. *Ennarationes in Cantica Canticorum. De Divinitatis Essentia*.
- 1079 - 1142 Peter Abelard. *Theologia*.
- c1080 -c1154 William of Conches. *Glosae super Boetium. Moraliu Dogma Philosophorum*.
- 1085 - 1148(?) Guillelmus a Sancto Theoderico. *Tractatus De Natura et Dignitate Amoris. Tractatus de Contemplando Deo*.
- 1090 - 1153 Bernardus Claraevallensis (Bernard of Clairvaux). *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae. Sermones in Cantica Canticorum, De consideratione*.
- 1096 - 1141 Hugh of St. Victor. *Didascalicon. Sapientia Christi* (opusculum).
- c1105 -c1160 Peter Lombard. *Sententiarum Liber Primus* (Dist. 28c6; Dist 32, Dist 34).
- d1172 Gillebertus de Hoilandia. *Sermones in Canticum Salomonis, Epistolae, Tractatus Ascetici*.
- 1098 – 1179 Hildegard of Bingen. *Scivias III, Liber de Vitae Meritorum*.
- d1173 Richard of St. Victor. *De praeparatione animi ad contemplationem (The Twelve Patriarchs or Benjamin Minor). The Mystical Ark (Benjamin Major). De Trinitate*.
- 12thc? Auctor Incertus. *Vitis Mystica Seu Tractatus De Passione Domini* (in the Works of S. Bernardi Claraevallensis).
- 12thc *Turba Philosophorum*. Alchemical work.
- 1175-1253 Robert Grosseteste.
- c1200 *Picatrix: Goal of the Sage*.
- <1245 ps. Alexander of Hales. *Summa Fratris Alexandri*.
- 1190->1250 Albertanus Brixiensis (Albertano of Brescia). *Liber Consolationis et Consilii* (de

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- prudentia, cp 6-9), *De amore et dilectione Dei et proximi et aliarum rerum et de forma vitae*; Sermon IV.
- d1264 Vicente De Beauvais. *Opus Uniuersale de Statu Principis, Speculum Majus*(?).
- 1214-1292/94 Roger Bacon. *Opus Majus*.
- 1217 - 1274 Bonaventura Bagnorensis (St. Bonaventure, John Fidenza). *Breviloquium, Itinerarium Mentis in Deo, Commentaria in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi* (XXVII, pt2A1Qiii, Conferences on the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, Conference IX: On The Gift of Wisdom); *Hexaëmeron*.
- 1225/7-1274 Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae, Scriptum super Sententiis*, etc.
- 1235-1315 Raymond Lull. *Book on the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit; De Virtutibus et Peccatis. Liber de gentili et tribus sapientibus*
- 1256-1301/2 Gertrude von Helfta. *Legatus divinae pietatis*.
- 1300-1366 Henry Suso. *Büchlein der Ewigen Weisheit (Horologium Sapientiae)*.
- 1304-1374 Francesco Petrarch. *De Sui Ipsius et Multorum Ignorantia, Invectiva contra Medicum*.
- 1365-1430 Christine de Pizan. Epistre d'Othea a Hector. *Livre des trois vertus* [sometimes called *Le Tresor de la cite des dames*], *Livre de Prudence* ?
- 1380-1471 Thomas à Kempis. *Vera Sapientia*.
- 1401-1464 Nicholas of Cusa. *De Docta Ignorantia, De Venatione Sapientiae*.
- 1433-1499 Marsilio Ficino. *Della Religione Cristiana. Pimander: Mercurii Trismegisti Liber de Sapientia et Potestate Dei*
- c1413-1454/5 Ambrosius de Spiera. *Quadragesimale* (i.e., Sermones Quadragesimae) *de floribus sapientiae* (printed 1476).
- 1463-1494 Pico della Mirandola. *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (On the Dignity of Man).
- d1504 Pelbartus de Themeswar. Sermones Pomerii de sanctis II. [Pars aestivalis].
- 1466-1536 Desiderius Erasmus. *De Pueris Instituendis, Enchiridion Militis Christiani*.
- 1477-1547 Jacobo Sadoletto. *De Laudibus Philosophiae Libri duo*.
- 1479–1567 Carolus Bovillus (Charles de Bouelles). *De Sapiente*.
- 1492-1540 Juan Luis Vives. *Introductio ad Sapientiam*.
- 1493-1541 Paracelsus (Philippus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim). *Astronomia Magna*, “De Fundamento Scientiarum Sapientaeque, drei Traktate”.
- 1497-1548 Agostino Steucho. *De philosophia perenni*.
- 1506-1580 Jerónimo Osório. *De Vera Sapientia*.
- c1530-c1584 Gerhard Dorn. “Speculativae philosophiae” in *Theatrum chemicum* I.
- 1533-1592 Michele de Montaigne. *Essais*.
- 1542-1591 Juan de la Cruz. *passim*.
- 1547-1606 Justus Lipsius. *Manuductio ad Stoicam Philosophiam; De Constantia* (1584).
- 1541-1604 Pierre Charron. *De la Sagesse* (1600).
- c1550-1600 John Case. *Speculum Moralium Quaestionum* (1585).
- 1556-1621 Guillaume du Vair. *La Philosophie Morale des Stoïques* (1585).
- 1556-1626 François Béroalde de Verville. *De la Sagesse* (1593).
- 1562-1626 Oliva Sabuco. *Nueva Filosofia de la Naturaleza del Hombre* (1587).
- 1573-1626 Francis Bacon. *New Atlantis, De Sapientia Veterum. Instauratio Magna: De Augmentis VII, VIII*.
- 1575-1624 Jacob Boehme. *Von der Gnadenwahl*, 1623 (On predestination, i.e. On election by grace); *Tafel der Drey Principen*, 1619 (Chart of the three principles) [*check this.*] *XL Questions concerning the Soule*.
1629. Aurora sapientiae.
- 1596-1650 Rene Descartes. Preface to the French edition of *Principles of Philosophy*.

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- 1601-1658 Baltasar Gracián *Oraculo manual y arte de prudencia (The Art of Worldly Wisdom)*.
- 1607-1681 John Pordage. *Sophia, das ist, Die holdseelige ewige Jungfrau der göttlichen Weisheit, oder, Wunderbahre geistliche Entdeck- und Offenbahrunge, so die theure Weisheit einer heiligen Seele gegeben* [1699] Amsterdam.
- 1624-1704 Jane Lead. *The Laws of Paradise, Given forth by Wisdom to a Translated Spirit*.
- 1632-1677 Benedict Spinoza.
- 1668-1744 Giambattista Vico. *Scienza Nuova; Orazioni Inaugurali (De Studiorum Finibus Naturae Humanae Convenientibus)*.
- 1688-1772 Emanuel Swedenborg. *Sapientia Angelica de Divino Amore, Deliciae Sapientiae de Amore Coniugali, Angelic Wisdom About Divine Providence. De Divina Sapientia* (essay).
- 1692 John Ray. *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation*.
- 1699 Thomas Traherne. *Thanksgiving for the Wisdom of the Word*.
- 1844-1900 Friedrich Nietzsche *Will to Power; The Birth of Tragedy; Ecce Homo*.