

## **Towards Holistic Scholarship: A Review of Selected Works on Israelite and Yoruba Wisdom Traditions**

By

**Iyanda Abel Olatoye & Akponorie Simeon Iruo-Oghene**

### **ABSTRACT**

Wisdom exists among the human inhabitants of the earth; it is peculiar to humanity. What makes the concept of wisdom an outstanding one is that it is uniquely ubiquitous and perennial, and every culture produces its own store of wisdom. The similarity in nature and forms of expression of Israelite and Yoruba wisdom traditions provide a wealth of comparative data. Interestingly, there are numerous parallels between Israelite wisdom tradition and that of the Yoruba people. The people of ancient Israel, like those of the surrounding nations, had developed a wisdom tradition that contains many wise sayings. These sayings were fruits of experience that contain valuable lessons for everyone but were used, especially, to inculcate good judgement into young people to enable them avoid or overcome many of life's pitfalls. To achieve this objective, young people are instructed on how to live in such a way that they would find personal fulfillment and contribute to the welfare of the community. This traditional emphasis on wisdom offers an illuminative contact point for Israelite and Yoruba cultural affinities. In other words, the Israelite concept of wisdom and its importance in the life of the people is also a unique phenomenon among the Yoruba. As in ancient Israel, Yoruba people see wisdom as precious diadem, and are fully aware of its colossal value. Wisdom is highly esteemed and can never be compared with money or other valuable possessions. For holistic scholarship and deeper understanding of these puzzling, but exciting, affinities between the Yoruba socio-cultural heritage and the way of life in ancient Israel, this paper reviews some existing works on wisdom done by various scholars from both cultures. Exploring these two wisdom traditions, the paper established that there are various issues in the Old Testament through which Africans, particularly the Yoruba people, have regarded the Old Testament as an affirmation of their cultural and religious heritage.

*Keywords:* holistic scholarship, review, works, Israelite, Yoruba

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Biblical scholars,<sup>1</sup> anthropologists<sup>2</sup> and archaeologists<sup>3</sup> have written profusely on wisdom in the ancient Near East and among the Israelites. Several volumes have also been written on this same issue from the Yoruba perspective. While it is not possible to review all the works on wisdom in Israel and among the Yoruba people, the researcher reviewed the works of some prominent authors, paid attention to their opinions and analysed them for the purpose of this study. The essence of doing this is to reflect extensively on the considerable parallels between the Hebrew wisdom tradition and that of other cultures so as to have a wider range of knowledge, identify the similarities between Israelites' and Yoruba understanding of wisdom and attest to the international connection of Israelite wisdom. It should be noted that Abraham's descendants are commonly referred to as the "Hebrews", "Israel" (or Israelites) and the "Jews". Therefore, in this study, Jewish, Hebrew or Israelite wisdom is mentioned, and considered as the same, regardless of their social, theological or chronological peculiarities. The materials reviewed in this work were grouped into three main classes: the first group is on the origin and development of Israelite wisdom, the second group deals with wisdom among the Yoruba while the third group focuses on the origin of Israelite and Yoruba cultural affinities.

## **II. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF WISDOM IN ISRAEL**

A casual glance at the origin and development of wisdom in ancient Israel reveals that the history and religion of Israel cannot be studied and understood in isolation from the overall context of the ancient Near East.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have written to establish that Israel, in many ways, reflects in her socio-cultural, political and religious life aspects of the cultures in the ancient Near East. The review of works of these scholars becomes imperative because they explored extensively the parallels between the wisdom literatures underlying the culture of Babylonia, Assyria, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Hebrew, as well as the larger Near Eastern background which they share. Some of the literatures were suggested, by these scholars, as having a common tradition. Therefore, looking at the origin and development of wisdom in Israel, two areas are going to be covered, that is, the Eastern background of Israelite Wisdom Literatures as well as Wisdom in Israel.

### **The Eastern Background of Israelite Wisdom Literature**

James L. Crenshaw,<sup>5</sup> in his work titled *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, confirmed that the Bible itself recognises Israelite kingship with

her neighbours in the area of wisdom tradition. He said that the Wisdom of Solomon, as Bible claimed, surpasses that of all the peoples of the East and Egypt. Israelite wisdom compares herself to that of Edom and Egypt; however, in case of Edom, little is known but Egyptian influence upon the Bible is remarkably acknowledged. There is general agreement, as Crenshaw posited, that the Israelite author of Proverbs 22:17-24:22 borrowed from an Egyptian source, even more than the actual appropriation of sayings from the Amen-em-opet.<sup>6</sup> He added that the Israelite practice of addressing the pupils as “my son” is derived from Egyptian instruction, in which the father teaches his son all he has learned about life. Commenting on the Mesopotamian influence, Crenshaw opined that the Mesopotamian relationship with Israelite literature differs in kind, if not in degree, and that the literary prototype of Proverbs, Job, and Qoheleth point more to a commonality of ideas than direct literary relationship. In the attempt to explain the historical background of these affinities, Crenshaw reflected on how Israelites came in contact with Egyptian and Mesopotamian Wisdom literature. Scholars, he argued, have assumed the royal court of Solomon and Hezekiah as points of contact where both foreign scribes and Israelite counselors would have worked, with the latter thought to have probably received their training in foreign court. However, the evidence for an institution of wise men at the court, as Crenshaw observed, is by no means conclusive.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, James B. Pritchard<sup>8</sup>, in his work *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, confirmed the biblical description of the great Wisdom of King Solomon as excelling “all the wisdom of Egypt”. He appreciated the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs and the recovery of the papyri of which the Egyptian wise men wrote their sayings. To him, the aptness of the reference to the Wisdom of Egypt is now documented by a wealth of instructions and precepts that attests to the reputation which Egypt had for this type of literature. Pritchard argued further that the oldest example of Egyptian wisdom is a collection of wise sayings from about fifteen hundred years before the time of Solomon. It bears the name of Ptah-hotep, the vizier of a king of the fifth Dynasty, and was addressed to his son who was to succeed him as the king’s chief counselor. Having reached the ideal age of one hundred and ten years, Ptah-hotep looked back on a long and successful life in the king’s service and offered his son what he had learned about wisdom and about the rules of good speech. Ptah-hotep reminded his son that “There is no one born wise”. Pritchard observed that this document, like many of the proverbs in the Bible, is a guide for success. Besides, in his shrewd observation, Pritchard attested to the fact that the frequent themes of the biblical book of Proverbs also find their analogue in the Babylonian and Assyrian instructions of wisdom. He

concluded, therefore, that in the light of the recent archaeological discoveries, it is no discredit to ancient Israel to assert that the Israelites were indebted to Babylon for certain concepts of law and authority, and that her wise men may well have had their wits sharpened by frequent contact with both Egyptian and Babylonian wisdom.

In line with this submission, Bernhard,<sup>9</sup> in his work *The Living World of the Old Testament*, claimed that the love of wisdom was not a monopoly of any people of antiquity. The wisdom tradition, as he said, is far more ancient than Socrates or anything found in the Old Testament. He argued that wisdom movement was essentially international. Wisdom writings circulated widely and had an influence far beyond the country of their origin. Since Israel was situated at the cultural crossroad of the Fertile Crescent, the wisdom of the East influenced her thought at an early period. Solomon, for instance, is said to have exchanged proverbs and riddles with the Queen of Sheba and Hiram of Tyre (I King 10:1). Bernhard argued that there was a kind of timeless value of and quality to wisdom. Hence, sages appeared to be detached completely from the limitations of time and culture. Sages often reflected on the problems of society just as they were familiar with them. These problems were mostly human problems which could be found in various forms in the societies. Emphasizing the relevance of the ancient Near Eastern cultures in the development of wisdom in ancient Israel, Bernhard disclosed that wisdom literature falls into two groups: Prudential literature, which is illustrated by the Egyptian Teaching of Amen-en-ope, the Babylonian book of proverbs, and the maxims collected in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Prudential literature consists of practical advice to the young person on how to live a good and successful life. The second group is Reflective Literature which consists of reflective probing into the depth of man's anguish about the meaning of life, often in a skeptical mood. However, both types of wisdom literature, as Bernhard observed, isolate the problem of man from the particularities of history and thereby stand in contrast to most of the literatures of the Old Testament. Modern sages, according to him, insist that the best way to solve the problem of world unity is to concentrate on man whose needs and aspirations are generally the same in all situations, and to rule out the memories, loyalties, and cultural peculiarities that make for human diversity and conflict. Bernhard also claimed that Egyptian wisdom made a deep impression on Israel's thought, from at least the time of King Solomon who established close diplomatic ties with Egypt. He repeated that the close similarities between the wisdom of Amen-em-ope and Proverbs 22: 12 – 23:14 shows that the Israelite writings relied heavily on the Egyptian writings.

Speaking within the same line of thought, that is, on the international connections of Hebrew wisdom, Johnson<sup>10</sup> attested to the considerable parallels between the Hebrew wisdom writings and those of Israel's neighbours, particularly Egypt and Babylon. To him, a wide range of parallels may be seen between Israel's wisdom literature and that of other Near Eastern peoples because Palestine was a corridor for the passage of peoples, with their ideas as well as with their armies. Thus it should not be surprising to discover that statements of general or universal truth that are found in Israel also are found in the literature of her neighbours. It is evident that the Old Testament itself recognises the existence of wisdom outside Israel. Solomon's wisdom is said to have been superior to that of "the people of the East" indeed of "all men" (I Kings 4:30-31; Gen. 41:8; Isaiah 19:11-12; Jeremiah 4:9:7)

Johnson argued that the records of Egyptian wisdom dated back to at least six hundred years before Abraham left Ur of the Chaldea. He claimed that numerous examples of ancient Egyptian wisdom writing have been discovered within the past century, but of special interest to the Old Testament students is "The instruction of Amen-em-ope". The reason why they are interested in this piece of Egyptian wisdom writing is that it bears striking similarities to proverbs 22:17-24:22. Johnson asserted that though it is impossible to determine which writing came first, the Egyptian or the Hebrew, the connection between the two has been observed by a wider range of modern Old Testament scholarship. However, Johnson agreed that while there are unquestionable similarities between Egyptian and Hebrew wisdom, there are also important theological differences.

Contributing to what other scholars have said so far, Beebe,<sup>11</sup> in his work *The Old Testament*, reported that wisdom writers in the Old Testament borrowed extensively from other cultures in the Ancient Near East. He opined that Canaanites, Edomites, and Arabs had traditions of wisdom which were assimilated by the Hebrew (Jer. 49:7; Obad 8; Job 1:1). To Beebe, some of the aphorisms in the book of Proverbs have their origin in the literature of Canaan, as far back as the Late Bronze Age (1500-1200B.C). The style of an ancient Canaanite proverb matches that of the Old Testament. Beebe argued further that the belief among Hebrew sages that wisdom was God's first act of creation was learned from Canaanite wisdom literature. He said that the book of proverbs carries several direct borrowings from the Old Canaanite wisdom. He also said that the Hebrew sages took over the Instruction of Amen-em-ope almost intact. Stressing the relevance and the universal trait of wisdom across different cultures, Beebe asserted that wisdom appealed to people widely spread throughout Near East. It furnished a cultural quality which crossed political line and

religious expression. The polytheists and the monotheists could use the same wisdom sayings, and with only slight adjustments, fit them into their own religious contexts. Though Old Testament Priests and Prophets might have rejected alien form of worship and beliefs, as Beebe observed, the Israelite sage welcomed wisdom from Canaan, Egypt, and Mesopotamia<sup>12</sup>.

### **Wisdom in Ancient Israel**

Scholars, as earlier noted, have written on Israelite Wisdom. Mark R. Sneed,<sup>13</sup> in his work *The Social World of the Sages – An introduction to Israelite and Jewish Wisdom Literature*, spoke extensively on Israelite Wisdom. Basically, according to him, wisdom is a skill, gift, or ability. In a nutshell, it is intelligence, especially high cognitive ability. Reflecting on the concept of wisdom within the Israelite perspective, Mark identified various types of wisdom. These, according to him, include Amateur Wisdom, Divine Wisdom, Royal Wisdom, Professional or Technical Wisdom, Mantic Wisdom and Literary or Aesthetic Wisdom. The Hebrew word for “wisdom”, as Mark argued, is *chokmah* while its adjectival for “wise” is *chakam*. This implies amateur, common, or non-technical wisdom, and can be interpreted to mean “cleverness” or “cunning”. Giving scriptural example of this, Mark talked about the woman that saved her city from Joab (2 Sam. 20:15 – 22). Through her wisdom, she convinced Joab that it would be more reasonable to kill one person rather than many in her city. Destroying the whole city would definitely result in killing those who were innocent. Abigail was another woman who displayed this type of wisdom to rescue her life and family from being slaughtered by David whom Nabal, her husband, had insulted (1 Sam. 25). She was able to convince David of the injustice in killing many innocent people as a result of one person’s moral laxity. David later pronounced, “Blessed is your discretion”, because she had restrained him from shedding the blood of the so called innocent.

Mark also talked about Divine Wisdom which he considered more specialised and fundamental. This is because the source of such wisdom is deities. In Israel, the Lord was very wise and with him are wisdom and strength<sup>14</sup>. The book of proverbs reveals that wisdom can be generated from the study of several aphorisms in the book. However, the book equally portrays God as the ultimate source of wisdom. In other words, wisdom has divine origin traceable to God. Speaking on Royal Wisdom, Mark claimed that kings were considered along with the gods. This explicitly explains the reason why King Solomon asked for an understanding mind to rule the Israelites. He desired wisdom above honour, wealth, or power over his enemies (1 Kings 3).<sup>15</sup> Exploring the semantic domain of wisdom, Mark affirmed that words for “wisdom” and

for “being wise”, in the Hebrew Bible, are often paired along with noun for “knowledge”, “understanding”, “instruction” and “advice”, and verbs like “to know”, “to instruct” “to prescribe” and “to advise”. He posited that wisdom is often connected with “instruction”. In his observation about the sages in ancient Israel, Mark established that there were professional sages who had undergone special training and education, appearing in group and forming a type of vocational guild. However, according to him, there were also amateur sages who trained themselves or had a unique innate abilities or assumed specific roles in the society. The most basic and archetypal role of sage in ancient Israel, as Mark claimed, would be that of parents. Parents are the quintessential teacher who passed on their life experiences and wisdom to their children to ensure they are productive members of the family and citizens in the entire community.<sup>16</sup> Children were also taught by their parents’ skills and general knowledge that would assist them to be successful in their lives and vocations. It is therefore reasonable to say that wisdom begins in the home in ancient Israel. In the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, the voice of the parent is well pronounced. In the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the vocative “my son” is employed to address the supposed audience. However, most scholars argued that the usage is metaphorical and used as a personal address to a student by his teacher. Elders, in ancient Israel, were also considered as sages. Mark, in his work referred to above, saw the relevance of the ancient Near Eastern culture in this idea. He said that in the Ancient Near East, being old or having grey hair was connected with wisdom. As a person aged in the ancient world, his or her honour and prestige increased correlatively, and they were valued for their wisdom and knowledge that had accrued over the years. Thus, younger people were expected to go to the elders for counsel. Village or city elder was the most basic kind of elders in the ancient world. Considering the wisdom of the elders in ancient Israel, Mark identified three main functions of an elder in the community. Firstly, elders served as peacemakers, adjudicating conflicts among members of the families. They were also chosen by the community based on their honour and value for impartiality and for placing the interest of the community above their own. Besides, their older age, numerous life experiences and accumulated wisdom enabled them to serve effectively. Secondly, elders served as representatives for their village or city in the larger gathering, festivals and in judicial cases that involved various clans. Thirdly, elders served as judges in the city or village in which they lived. Apart from the village or city elders, there were also national or tribal elders who would be from the most prestigious families that represent regions and would meet regularly. Judges, in ancient Israel, were also identified as sages. Though, elders could serve as judges in the society as earlier observed, there were also judges who were governmental officials.

Kings also served as sages in Israel, just like in the ancient Mesopotamia where their kings demonstrated great wisdom and piety in building of temples for gods. In the Hebrew Bible, Solomon is portrayed as a sage and it is no surprise that the authorship of the book of Proverbs is ascribed to him. In the same vein, Hezekiah is said to have instructed his officials to collect the Proverbs of Solomon (Prov. 25:1). Mark noted that both the Kings of Israel and other ancient Near Eastern nations were expected to be paragons of virtue, power and wisdom. Closely connected with the wise king are his courtiers and counselors who could also be referred to as sages. These were also scribes, though not very often. There were also mantic sages and magicians. Daniel and his three friends served as mantic sages for the Babylonians.<sup>17</sup>

In his own submission, Julius<sup>18</sup> referred to wisdom as one of the most interesting and important elements in the development of Judaism. He argued that the wise men or sages take their place beside the priests as teachers of youth in ethics and religion. The interest of these wise men was not in Jewish but in human life, and they have therefore been called humanists. Nothing could be seen more clearly than the fact that they recognized wisdom as universal. Julius disclosed that there are striking parallels to our biblical Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes among the ancient Egyptians and Babylonians as well as among other nations. However, to him, this does not mean that Jewish wisdom was dependent upon any of these, but that wisdom is international; everywhere the fruit of life's experience is expressed in this manner, it is of universal application. Julius claimed that there are three wisdom books, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. He said that others, like the story of Ahikar, the book of Jesus Ben Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, and the Wisdom of Solomon are still extant, but they were not included in the Hebrew canon.

The teaching of the wise men, as Julius observed, dealt with the whole range of life; with personal affairs, including good manners as well as good morals; with family relations, including parents, children, and servants; with social relationship, between friends and enemies, between rich and poor; with professional and business matters; and with public life and its interests. There is a wealth of wisdom, of sober and realistic observation, of sharp epigrammatic characterization, of kindly humour and biting sarcasm, of warm personal exhortation and urgent appeal that makes the book of Proverbs a veritable mine of good counsel for the art of right living. The great motive of wise living is always personal happiness. Julius considered wise men as profoundly religious because their principle of morals and religion is that goodness is rewarded, wickedness is punished. The wise men, as he observed, tried to inculcate the principle of worthy



life by glorifying wisdom as its secret and source. Looking through the various books of wisdom, Julius concluded that the book of Proverbs was the work of orthodox men, who assumed that the righteous and the wicked are rewarded according to their deserts. But the validity of this doctrine was challenged and denied by the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes, who could not reconcile it with the fact of life.<sup>19</sup>

Reflecting on the relevance of Israelite wisdom tradition in a popular context, Tullock<sup>20</sup> opined that Israelites contributed several things to the entire world; even in the modern days, the people are still making invaluable contributions to human society. To him, of all her literatures, the most widely admired and acceptable was the words of her sages and the songs of her singers. Her proverbs and metaphors are reflected in the speech of many lands. The book of Job, which is her greatest literary masterpiece, ponders on the mystery of some of life's deepest and unanswered questions. Her Psalms also reflect the full range of human emotion, from abject misery to ecstatic praise. The explicitness of her love songs challenges both the Jewish and Christian interpreters. Though the teacher of wisdom was said to be seldom mentioned in the Old Testament outside the wisdom literature, Tullock confirmed that they were considered alongside the priest and prophets as found in Jeremiah 18:18. However, interest in wisdom in Israel, as Tullock claimed, was much older than the time of Jeremiah. Wisdom does not know political and international boundaries. Its teachings were of two types: practical wisdom, which was concerned with the problems of everyday living; and secondly, the use of easily remembered literary forms like proverbs, fables and short poetic discourses on human problem, which could be committed to memory.

### **III. WISDOM AMONG THE YORUBA PEOPLE**

Just as in the ancient Israel, the concept of wisdom is one of the most highly cherished phenomena among the Yoruba. The Yoruba people consider wisdom, known as *gb-n*, as precious diadem one must possess for living a fulfilled or successful life. One Yoruba maxim says: *Cni 9 gb-n abi w5rz n7k6n*,<sup>21</sup> (He who is wise has gold in his belly). In his shrewd observation, Akogun,<sup>22</sup> while identifying the most cherished world-view of the Yoruba, confirmed that money which is worshipped in many cultures occupies bottom position in the Yoruba scale of value system, but wisdom, knowledge and intelligence known collectively as *gb-n*, *\*m=* and *)ye* top the scale to be followed closely by valour. According to him, integrity comes third while industry comes fourth. It is after wisdom and the other attributes would have taken their seat would the man with money and material wealth be considered. One Yoruba adage says: *Ow9 la f7 n ra csin, [gb-n la f7 n g6n 5n*<sup>23</sup> (We use money to buy a horse but use wisdom

to ride on it).

Regarding the sources of wisdom among the Yoruba, oral traditions, as Oyeronke<sup>24</sup> opined, constitute the starting point of any investigation into Yoruba thought system. Oyeronke stated that Yoruba oral genres include :*)we* (Proverb), the *Ifq* corpus, *Or7k8* (lineage and individual praise poetry) and *\*jqlq* (hunter's poetry), etc. Other sources include: Songs, Stories, Riddles and Taboos,<sup>25</sup> etc. In agreement with this, Bamidele,<sup>26</sup> Faycmi,<sup>27</sup> Babatunde,<sup>28</sup> Aderinto<sup>29</sup> and others confirmed the value and the use of proverbs in traditional Yoruba society. For instance, Bamidele in his work, *The History and Tradition of the Yoruba People*, disclosed that among the Yoruba people, proverbs and adages form a significant part of everyday language, and are used extensively in every form of communication<sup>30</sup>. This submission was developed by Fayemi who argued that the Yoruba accord great respect for intelligent and expert use of language, especially the appropriate use of proverbs and, as such, the *zgbz* (elder) is expected to exhibit or display this capacity. Fayemi, however, said that the capacity for exhibiting this expert use of language is not solely based on old age as there are some youths, who are witty in the genre of proverbial communication and intelligent use of language.<sup>31</sup> In the Yoruba thought pattern, displaying sagacity in the use of spoken word is the sign or herald of being cultured. It is equally a distinctive characteristic of conversational prudence and the epitome of intellectual maturity.

Babatunde, in her work, *The Effect of Globalization on the Yoruba Language and Culture*, agreed with Oyeronke on proverb as a source of wisdom in traditional Yoruba community. She argued that, in Yoruba culture, it is a mark of wisdom to interlace one's expression or utterance with proverbs. According to her, proverbs are appreciated as the vehicle for words, and therefore a Yoruba proverb puts it: *)we lcsin =r=, b7 =r= bq s=n6 Owe la 9 f8 wq a*, (proverbs are the horses for words, for when words are lost we use proverbs to seek them out).<sup>32</sup> Following others' submissions, Babatunde said that proverbs are highly valued in Yoruba culture and individuals who are skilled in proverbs are highly revered in the Yoruba community because they have ability to get to the heart of a matter through the use of appropriate proverbs. Proverbs, as she claimed, have time and context of application. She concluded that proverbs enrich or enhance human's speech and they are exclusively the preserve of elders. Within this understanding, Aderinto also submitted that the Yoruba people believe in the efficacy of proverbs in message deliver, and to imprint on the minds of their fellow people carefulness, so that people can live a fruitful and problem-free life.<sup>33</sup> He expressed further that the Yoruba people cherished the use of proverbs. Proverbs, according to him, can be

used as weapons to put people on the right track in matters relating to behaviour. Carefulness, as a most sensitive and extremely important virtue among the Yoruba people, is diligently conveyed by the appropriate use of proverbs.

In a more comprehensive way, Akinola,<sup>34</sup> in his work “Gerontology and Juvenility as Portrayed in Yoruba Philosophical Proverbs”, emphasised the significance of proverb in Yoruba traditional setting. Speaking on the language and harmony of the Yoruba proverbs, Akinola observed that, in the social life of the Yoruba people, proverbs constitute a powerful device for shaping moral beliefs, opinions and consciousness. The poetics of Yoruba proverbs form a major aesthetic aspect of its nature. Thus, an individual Yoruba who is deeply cultured employs proverbs when making speeches in daily activities. These proverbs are always appropriately applied to correlate with the specific subject matter of discourse in the context of use. Yoruba proverbs are very unique, marked out from ordinary maxims and are expressed in figurative mode.<sup>35</sup> Reflecting on the Yoruba proverbs and moral instruction, Akinola added that many Yoruba proverbs explored local, traditional and cultural world view, history as well as the social values of the Yoruba people to press home their decisions on moral directives to the youths. That was why proverbs are described as the poetry and moral science of the Yoruba nation. Many Yoruba proverbs are used to portray traditional observations on the nature of things.<sup>36</sup> They emanate from what the aged people observed from natural phenomena and incidences of the past which could be didactic in orientating the youths.

The content of Yoruba proverbs include social charters, praising what the people cherish and consider as virtue as well as condemning bad practices. Among the acceptable virtues in Yoruba proverbs are respect for elders, humility, hard work, consideration for others, truthfulness and respect for vows, pledges or promises. Idleness and busy bodies are part of the vices condemned in Yoruba proverbs. Elders, among the Yoruba, use proverbs to embellish and support arguments in their conversation. Proverbs could also be used in other oratory events. Elders, according to Akinola, are the people considered to possess this convicting power ability.<sup>37</sup> Proverbs, therefore, are domicile to the aged people because they quote them effortlessly from the reservoir of their acquired knowledge. Among the Yoruba people, proverbs are considered the wealth of knowledge gathered for several years by the elders on the basis of their past experiences and the study of natural phenomena of life.

In his explanation on the use of Yoruba proverbs, Akinola also talked about the relevance of the youths in traditional Yoruba community. He

said that, in spite of the considerable number of Yoruba proverbs that portray the aged people as the repository of wisdom and experience, there are other Yoruba proverbs that reveal the youth as equally wise, strong, creative, caring, intelligent, helpful and very relevant in the progress of their family and the society at large. Nevertheless, some Yoruba proverbs encourage the youths to seek the help of elders. In line with this, wisdom, as observed in the words of Akinola, is always characterized by the judicious use of proverbs among the Yoruba people. There are several proverbs which are meant to glorify the wisdom of the elderly person, calling the youth who might want to take such for granted to order.<sup>38</sup> The Yoruba people consider the elders as the authority figures, custodians of society's history and tradition whose wealth of knowledge is equal to a well-stocked archive and whose demise is tantamount to setting a rich library ablaze. Elders are those who are capable of explaining to younger generation the ancient events that had happened in the past and their implication for the present time through proverbs. Many of these proverbs are directed to the younger people, admonishing them to tap from the wealth of experience of the aged people.

Some Yoruba proverbs also reveal cautions against elder's misdemeanor. The exalted and honourable position of the elders in the Yoruba society is highly cherished. Many Yoruba proverbs describe the uniqueness and enviable virtues of the elders; and therefore warn against misconduct.<sup>39</sup> The reason is that elders are the people on which the moral rectitude as well as the ethical standard of the community is hung. They are expected to guild, help, support and control the youth in adhering strictly to moral values of the Yoruba community. As a guild or individual, an elder is therefore not expected to mislead the innocent youths. In order to sustain their exalted position, elders are expected to be firm, factual and truthful. They must be people of their words, and not be double tongued, liars, deceivers or fraudulent persons.<sup>40</sup>

Adding to what others have said on the Yoruba proverbs, Adejube<sup>41</sup> in his work, "Portrayal of Womenfolk in Yoruba proverbs", submitted that proverb is considered one of the most prominent forms of folklore. He observed that proverb could be considered the most enduring oral or verbal art whose widespread usage has been popularly recognised through the print and electronic media. Unlike 'tales in moonlight' and 'ground parents' folktales' which are gradually going into extinction, proverb continues to be well used, and judiciously constitutes part of Yoruba daily living. Yoruba proverbs could be seen as the essential foundation, considerable for social and cultural wisdom. In line with what Akinola had said, Adejube stressed that proverbs, among the Yoruba people, serve as

powerful rhetorical means of shaping ethical beliefs, opinions and consciousness of the people.

In order to press home his point on the relevance of proverbs in communication, Adejube made some etymological analyses of the word 'proverb'. He established that the word 'proverb' is taken from the Latin word 'proverbium'. 'Pro', as he said, means 'in front of', while 'verbium' means 'word'. This, according to Adejube, implies that proverb takes the place of ordinary words. The indispensable role of Yoruba proverbs in communication is deeply illustrated. In other words, proverbs are employed in the place of ordinary daily expression so as to reveal deeper meaning. Through proverbs, collective wisdom and worldview are sustained and transmitted from one generation to the other.<sup>42</sup> Proverbs are short pithy sayings with implicit moral truths. They are distillations of the wisdom of the people acquired and accumulated over the years from everyday experiences. Proverbs proffer the essence of a particular conversation in a brief and unmistakable manner, by clarifying vividly the subject matter<sup>43</sup>. So, proverb, according to Adejube, can be seen as a very rich source of imagery and succinct expression on which more elaborate forms can be derived.

Fasehun,<sup>44</sup> in her work, "Proverbial Exposition of the Aesthetic Sensibilities of the Yoruba Race", posited that proverbs are variously used for many purposes. According to her, there are different types of proverbs designed for every situation in life. Yoruba people have proverbs that are deliberately attached to almost everything in their physical and cultural environment. Similar to what others have said, Fasehun disclosed that Yoruba proverb is all-embracing and encompassing because it is taken out of various activities in the society, natural objects and phenomena. She agreed with Akinola that there are classes of proverbs that indicate ideas about beliefs in respect of what is good and beautiful in the Yoruba community. However, unlike Akinola, and others, she argued that aesthetics which is central in the proverbial ideology of the Yoruba people means different things to different people. She noted, for example, that to some people, it is the beauty of face and body while, to others, it is what is inside that makes a person beautiful. Nevertheless, irrespective of the way aesthetics had been considered, emphasis is quite laid on the relevance of the Yoruba proverbs.

Fasehun argued that the use of proverb is a worldwide phenomenon that is highly cherished right from the ancient past to the present age. The study of the Yoruba proverb, she said, commenced in 1852 during the year Samuel Ajayi Crowther collected several Yoruba proverbs in his book titled *The Vocabulary of Yoruba Language*.<sup>45</sup> Speaking on the aesthetics of

Yoruba proverbs, Fasehun maintained that a major aesthetic quality of Yoruba proverbs is their poetic language and imagery. These reflect, most often, the characteristics of the Yoruba domestic animals, hunting activities, folklore, beliefs, religions, social institutions, forms of natural life and objects, and many others.<sup>46</sup> Great and invaluable importance is accorded the use of proverbs among the Yoruba people. This is done mainly to sustain, control and most significantly to preserve them for accurate utilisation. Though many of them were not written down, every serious-minded user of Yoruba proverbs is deeply conscious of the standard and adheres strictly to the regulations so as to keep the sanctity of the proverbs from abuse and reckless use.<sup>47</sup> Fasehun added that proverbs are imbued with unassailable truths as many of them cannot be easily faulted. They are usually encapsulated in coded forms and as a result, it is very difficult for those who are not witty to decode. The relevance of Fasehun's work is summed up in her submission that Yoruba proverbs seem to be the exclusive preserve of the elders as younger people are not expected to use them while talking without the initial permission by the elders or by certain apologetic remarks which might come up either before the speech or immediately after the statement.<sup>48</sup> Proverbs, according to Fasehun, help to proffer certain pointedness and clarity of focus to a dialogue. They are romantic, having entertainment value, in terms of spicing up speech or in the area of making them more exciting to listeners. Fasehun concluded that proverbs are the storehouse of the wisdom of the Yoruba people.

Faturoti,<sup>49</sup> in his work "An Insight into Ethical and Behavioural Patterns in Yoruba Proverbs", also opined that proverb is one of the oldest and most striking genres of the Yoruba oral literature. Proverbs, among the Yoruba, are highly valued and considered as the wisdom lore. No wonder why speakers, writers and general users of the Yoruba language use proverbs as significant means of communication in all their quotidian activities.<sup>50</sup> Proverbs, as Faturoti observed, are also employed to articulate their views, to educate, encourage and facilitate their wheel of interaction. One may not be able to participate meaningfully in a critical communal discussion if one is not witty in quoting and understanding the meaning of proverbs relevant to the context of communication in Yoruba society.<sup>51</sup>

Proverbs are incontrovertibly inherent in Yoruba life and this explicitly explains why they are usually accentuated as viable instruments of communication, after being considered to be persuasive and convincing enough.<sup>52</sup> Faturoti stressed that Yoruba people glorify proverbs as the "horses" for words at different level of expression. In other words, if a word is lost, a proverb is used to find it. The "words that are lost" in this

context means “ambiguous or complex expressions” while “horses” (proverbs) are the channels through which communication is made possible. According to Faturoti, proverbs have been described as succinct sayings of folk intelligence, often compressed in form, with deeper meaning and roundly used in giving credence to expression. Proverbs, as a speech act, are meaningful and abridged expressions, laced up with age long lexemes and construction. They are said be pithy sayings of folk wisdom that uses structural variations with colourful manifestations of language.<sup>53</sup> Faturoti further revealed that proverbs x-ray the life and ethical ideas of a given society and in some cases are used to regulate rules of life. They are the guiding oracles that man has discovered for himself in the great business of how to be, to do and to do without. Therefore, proverbs are allowed to dictate the values by which every member of the community should live.

In order to offer formidable impetus to the value and the indispensability of proverbs, as Faturoti observed, the Yoruba people intentionally promote them to the realm of being difficult to violate, and to restrict the users to the specific sphere of societal etiquette. This purpose has been achieved maximally in the pre-literate Yoruba society. However, the contemporaneous society is repugnantly disinclined to proverbs acceptability,<sup>54</sup> practicability and functionality. Faturoti said that proverbs, nowadays, are no longer being employed as the unwritten regulations and tools of social guide like before. He said this is probably because of cultural influence from the Western world. Faturoti could be justified because many people today, particularly the youths, cannot speak or write Yoruba language correctly. In fact, in some schools nowadays, offering Yoruba language as a subject has been made optional.

As a result of this shortcoming, prevailing self-destructive values are corrupting the psyche of the people in an era of social gridlock in dire need of normative wisdom and cultural revival. The values of the ancient times, when people exhibited good character and craved for good name, using proverbial sayings with moral underpinnings as their guide, are no more ascendant in present Yoruba society.<sup>55</sup> In addition to what he earlier said, Faturoti stated that there are several proverbs, among the Yoruba, that are rendered in various dialects across the entire Yoruba linguistic landscape. In other words, every Yoruba tribe has its own set of proverbs that may not be understood by the non-speaker of the dialect.

In his own work titled “Semiotics Representations and Socio-cultural value of Yoruba Proverbs on Parenting and Child Rearing”, Ojo<sup>56</sup> argued that Yoruba has rich culture and in the realm of their oral literature, there exist songs, stories, recitation, fables, poetry and proverbs. To him,

proverbs are well rooted in Yoruba culture and almost every Yoruba person who grows up in a village, becomes familiar with proverbs. The proverbial language has a rich collection of words, combination of words, phrases, symbols, pictures, allusions, associations, and comparison. Ojo stressed that proverbs are taken in such a way that every part of the society is wholly portrayed in them. Indeed, proverbs themselves are symbols of communication which are cleverly packed into brief sentences<sup>57</sup>. They could be expressed in anecdotes and stories. Sometimes, they could be carved on words in reference to several materials and could be sung, danced or acted. What is fascinating in Ojo's submission is his argument that many proverbs act as catalysts of knowledge, philosophy, ethics, morals and wisdom. Proverbs, as he claimed, also draw attention to dangers in human relations. What is interesting about proverbs is that they equally appeal to human emotions, even beyond mere reflection.<sup>58</sup> Proverbs are considered along ethical issues and not restricted to the head but also to conscience. They arouse human conscience, giving assurance and help in the course of deciding between good and evil, justice and injustice, right and wrong, etc. Within the Yoruba context, the relevance of proverbs cannot be exaggerated.<sup>59</sup>

Proverbs are deeply valuable and their enormous advantages are unanimously cherished in the traditional Yoruba society. Ojo observed further that proverbs could be used as a means of training and teaching the children as well as creating harmonious relation in different aspects of life. Some of the issues considerable in proverbs include sacredness of life and its preservation, communal cooperation, respect for elders, solidarity, virtues like kindness, bravery, unity, justice, generosity, friendship, hard work, strength, trust, love, fairness, and mutual relationship.<sup>60</sup> Like any other African people, Yoruba people use proverbs as ingredients in language. In recent times, people find it difficult to understand and interpret proverbs because elderly ones in the community are those commonly using proverbs.<sup>61</sup>

*Ifq* corpus is another remarkable source of wisdom in traditional Yoruba society. Peel,<sup>62</sup> Adegboyega,<sup>63</sup> Farinade,<sup>64</sup> K1mi,<sup>65</sup> Ifal[lq,<sup>66</sup> Ab7nb-lq,<sup>67</sup> Lai,<sup>68</sup> among others, have attributed the corpus of wisdom to *Ifq*. Peel, in his work "Yoruba Religion: Seeing it in History, Seeing it Whole", examined the relevance of *Ifq* in the course of Yoruba wisdom. He considered *Ifq* as occupying a central position in Yoruba religion. According to him, a large family of divination systems that extends across many cultures of Africa and Asia belongs to *Ifq*. *Ifq* in Peel's submission is an extraordinary cultural artifact. Within the basic framework of 16 options is organised a vast corpus of proverbs, myth, moral reflection, sage



philosophy, and theological rationalisation. In line with Peel's argument, one can deduce that *Ifq*, in reference to its divine origin, is the central creative force in Yoruba religion. This is connected with *Olodumare* (God) himself. In Yoruba theology, *Ir5nm/l2* (spiritual forces) are messengers of *Olodumare*, ruling over all the existing phenomena in heaven and the earth. So, the ancient Yoruba *Ifq* doctrine considered the universe as a perfect creation of *Olodumare* (God). There is no exaggeration in saying that *Ifq* corpus could be considered as the text of Yoruba religion which contains cultural wisdom. In other words, it could be deduced that the Yoruba cultural wisdom is contained in *Ifq*.

Adegboyega, in her work title "The Metaphysical and Epistemological Relevance of *Ifq* Corpus", reflected extensively on the place of *Ifq* Corpus in Yoruba wisdom tradition. She acknowledged the existence of other divinations such as *C1r8nd7nl9g5n* and *Zgb8gbz*; she however observed that *Ifq* is often preferred above any other forms of divination by the Yoruba people. *Ifq*, according to her, is one of the most important deities. She opined that without *Ifq*, the value of the Yoruba gods would diminish. The Yoruba people believed that when God is punishing a man, the only way to ascertain and pacify such is to consult *Ifq* and if a community is to make sacrifice to god, that can also be known by consulting *Ifq*.<sup>69</sup> Thus *Ifq* is considered the only active mouth piece of Yoruba traditional religion.<sup>70</sup> Adegboyega stated further that wisdom, knowledge and understanding made *+r5nm8lz* serve as a link between him and other gods. Besides, his wisdom, knowledge and understanding cover the past, present and the future. *+r5nm8lz* is known to be instrumental to the foundation of the earth, the creation of human beings and their journey into the world.<sup>71</sup> He is identified with the knowledge of all things and therefore described as an inexhaustible repository of knowledge. *+r5nm8lz* is believed to have knowledge and unquestionable answers to the intractable problems of human beings.<sup>72</sup> Consulting *Ifq*, the Yoruba people have access to the meaning and purpose of events in the past, present and future. Knowing everything about human beings, *Ifq* can supply adequate information about them since he was a witness to every human's choice of destiny.<sup>73</sup>

In the similar vein, Fár8nqdé, in his work "Cowrie Shell Divination & Ifa Spiritual Tools", added that it is impossible to separate the subject of *Od6 Ifq* (Ifa signatures) from the Yoruba culture and traditions. He argued that the soul and heart beat of the Yoruba people as a whole resides within the oral corpus of the *Ifq* divination and worship system. The Yoruba science, cosmology, metaphysics, medicine and wisdom, according to Fár8nqdé, are traceable to *Ifq* corpus. *Ifq* is believed to embody the wisdom of life, truth and the revelation of human destiny and destination.<sup>74</sup> Fár8nqdé

posited that *Ifq* is the living body of wisdom which was delivered by *Ol9d6mar4to +r5nm8lz* who is the only witness to human destiny in the spiritual realm before birth. *+r5nm8lz* used this wisdom to heal and to resolve all human problems.<sup>75</sup> He stressed further that the *Od6* (signatures) and *csc* (verse (s)) of *Ifq* are road maps that can guide one in details through life towards the things that all human beings cherish such as family, children, health, long life, love, money, freedom from loss, victory over sickness and death.<sup>76</sup>

In her own opinion, K1mi posited that *Ifq* is highly honoured among the Yoruba. This is done not only for its redemptive power but also for the cultural link it provides between man and the other gods. *\$x6*, who had been the erratic god, occupies a place in *Ifq* divination rites.<sup>77</sup> By these rites, the Yoruba mind communes with its environment in terms of phenomena like drought, fire, wind, earth and other things. K1mi observed that *Ifq* is also called *+r5nm8lz* and was one of those gods that journeyed from heaven to earth to found the ancient Yoruba city called *Il3-if2*. In *If2*, he fathered eight children, practised successfully his profession as seer and solver of all problems.<sup>78</sup> He founded a cult of diviners, gathered a band of disciples and was won to wander from city to city in the course of his profession. But due to the impertinence of his youngest son, *{l-w=*, *+r5nm8lz* was annoyed and the god of wisdom decided to part ways with earthlings and journeyed back to heaven by the much climbed ‘palm tree’.<sup>79</sup>

Commenting on the same wisdom of *Ifq*, *Ifql[lq*, in his work titled “*Ifq* yesterday, *Ifq* today, *Ifq* tomorrow: The ever expanding corpus of wisdom we call *Ifq*”, argued that within *Ifq* is housed all the wisdom and knowledge of the world past, present, and future. However, the work of *Ifal[lq* was basically on the expansion of this Yoruba oral tradition. While considering the intimate connection of *+sun* with *Ifq* divination, *Ab7nb-lq* considered *Ifq* as bag of wisdom but *Lai*, in his own opinion, referred to it as the deity of wisdom. In whatever way it may have been depicted, *Ifq* corpus remains a notable source of wisdom among the Yoruba people.

Puzzling, but exciting, in Yoruba wisdom tradition is the ascription of wisdom to the elderly people. Wisdom is highly considered as sacrosanct in recognising elderly people in Yoruba worldview. In line with this, *Adeboye*,<sup>80</sup> in her work titled “The Changing Conception of Elderhood in Ibadan, 1830 – 2000”, stressed that old people were expected to possess wisdom, tact and maturity accumulated through experiences over the years. These were collectively called *[gb-nzgbz* (elderly wisdom). The respect enjoyed by the elders and social recognition they had, as *Adeboye* noted, did not imply that the youths were considered irrelevant. At the

level of discourse, the Yoruba idea was that there should be mutual respect and cooperation between the elders and the youths. However, in reality, the philosophy behind these ideas was seldom followed. Within the lineage, elders acted largely as if they had a monopoly of wisdom. Thus, their views were rarely to be challenged, and dissenting opinions from the youths were condescendingly treated as impulsive behaviours or as outright affront and disrespect, which sometimes attracted heavy punishment depending on how 'young' the 'offender' was, and on his past 'record of offence'.

Adeboye's submission is not tenable as it cannot be defended successfully. One can ask, at what point in the cultural history of the Yoruba was that moral approach noticed. Are the youths not prone to exuberance? Should such laxity be allowed without caution? The Yoruba philosophy, as laid down in their proverbial sayings, holds the two views: *Cnu zgbz lob8 ti n gb9* (It is in the mouth of the elders that the matured kolanut tastes better) and *{m[d3 gb-n zgbz gb-n la fi dq il3 if2* (The collective wisdom of the aged and young led to the founding of Ife). It is generally believed among the Yoruba that: *{m[d3 gb-d= m[ [w- w2 k7 9 t9 l4 bq zgbz jcun* (a child must know how to wash his hand (well- behaved) before he can eat (be privileged) with the elder).

Speaking on the role of elders in relation to wisdom, Manu<sup>81</sup> viewed elders as representing the tradition and the wisdom of the past. He however made a distinction between "elder" and "older" person. According to him, older person has simply lived a longer life than most of the people, but is not considered as one who deserves high praise and respect because his life has not been positive example for the community. He said older person could be a thief or drunkard, an evil person or somebody who never married and had children. An elder, on the other hand, is someone who is given the highest status generally in African culture because he or she has lived a life of purpose, and there is nothing more respected than living a purposeful life. Manu concluded that an elder is given the highest status because he represents the closest link to the wisdom of the spirit world.

Manu's conclusion was developed by Aderemi<sup>82</sup> who disclosed that, among the Yoruba, the old people are noted as the repositories of experience, memories, authority and wisdom, and thus, among them, it is said that: *zgbz k0 s7 n'7l65, 8l5 bzj1, baql3 il3 k6, il3 di ahoro*, (without the elderly people, community and villages will collapse). In his own contribution, {lqy7nkq<sup>83</sup> added that, traditionally, the older persons are those playing leadership roles in the society and were seen as repositories of wisdom. He said that the elderly people in Nigerian society carry out traditional roles of guardians of the ancestral values, chief custodians of

society's treasures and upholders of history, customs, folklores, cultural values, and wisdom. {lqy7nkq argued further that older persons settle dispute and conflicts arising from members of the family, based on their position, skill, knowledge, wisdom, vision and experience acquired along the journey to old age.

#### **IV. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF HEBREW AND YORUBA CULTURAL AFFINITIES**

It would be romantic to expect that Yoruba wisdom tradition would remain static in a dynamic world. Nonetheless, correct education and appreciation of Yoruba world-view, which is composed of the people's cosmological beliefs and practices, religions and philosophy are basic and crucial to understanding of Africa and Africans, their history and cultural contact, particularly to the cultural, religious, economic, military, and political life of ancient Israel. In his work, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament*, Adamo<sup>84</sup> argued that though the Hebrew Bible is primarily the record of, and a witness to the vertical and horizontal revelation of God within the history and experience of a peculiar people (Israel), it cannot but recognize God's involvement with other nations, which have contact with these "chosen people". This is because Israel had to struggle for her survival among the people in ancient Near East. She had to fight against the Amorites, Canaanites and several other peoples, even on getting to the promise land the struggle did not end. She came in contact with traders, soldiers, priests and prophets of powerful nations such as the Philistines, the Phoenicians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians and others. The religions of these nations, as Adamo observed, also became "a never-ending threat to the faith of Israel". Adamo argued further that as Israel came in contact with these foreign nations, she was forced to acknowledge the reality of their presence, and to redefine her own identity in the light of God's plan. Although some of these nations sometimes played a secondary role in shaping the political, religious and economic history of ancient Israel, as Adamo confirmed, others played a major role. Therefore, in order to understand properly the Old Testament, it is important to understand the life and thought of the people who have played major or minor roles in Israel's destiny.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, Adamo could be justified because in many ways, the African and Jewish cultures are very much alike. In his systematic commentary on Genesis 1-11, Modupe Oduyoye<sup>86</sup> spoke on the affinities between the African socio-cultural heritage and the way of life in ancient Israel. Revealing the secret behind these affinities, Getui et al.<sup>87</sup> disclosed that the indebtedness of the Hebrew to Africa is acknowledged throughout the Old Testament, from the perspective of religion, economic, politics, military, history, aesthetics, ethnics, and kingship. They argued that Egypt

is depicted as the country of refuge and bounty for Abraham and his descendants. Joseph, the son of Jacob, became the instrument for the rescue of his family from starvation. Eventually, the descendants of Abraham settled in Egypt, and the drama unfolds in the book of Pentateuch.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The works reviewed so far have revealed various scholarly opinions on Israelite and Yoruba wisdom traditions. Based on their submissions, it is discovered that the origin of Israelite wisdom could be traced to the ancient Near East, and that it could therefore not be studied in isolation from this background. Other scholars whose works were reviewed concentrated on wisdom or wisdom literature in ancient Israel. The third group of scholars focused on the nature, the sources and the values of Yoruba wisdom tradition as well as the indebtedness of Hebrew to Africa in relation to wisdom. Therefore, nudged by these scholars, it could be inferred that there are various issues in the Old Testament through which Africans, particularly the Yoruba people, have regarded the Old Testament as an affirmation of their cultural and religious heritage. Thus, having read or heard the biblical story, Yoruba converts have discerned the continuity and affinity between the biblical ways of life and their own.

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**About the Authors:** Dr Iyanda Abel Olatoye (iyandaolat@gmail.com) is of the Department of Religious Studies, Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Ondo State, Nigeria; Dr Akponorie Simeon Iruo-Oghene (akponoriesimeon@gmail.com) is of Archbishop Vining College of Theology, Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria.



#### **APA**

Olatoye, I. A. & Iruo-Oghene, A. S. (2024). Towards Holistic Scholarship: A Review of Selected Works on Israelite and Yoruba Wisdom Traditions. *International Journal of General Studies (IJGS)*, 4(1), 19-47. <https://klamidas.com/ijgs-v4n1-2024-02/>.

#### **MLA**

Olatoye, Iyanda Abel and Iruo-Oghene, Akponorie Simeon. “Towards Holistic Scholarship: A Review of Selected Works on Israelite and Yoruba Wisdom Traditions”. *International Journal of General Studies (IJGS)*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2024, pp. 19-47. <https://klamidas.com/ijgs-v4n1-2024-02/>.