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## The Seven Pillars of the House of Wisdom

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**Abstract:** In the Proverbs, Solomon tells that the House of Wisdom has seven pillars. According to ancient and medieval thinkers, these pillars are the seven dispositions that a person must have to become wiser. Besides this direct interpretation of the pillars, we can also find them used as allegorical symbols. For instance, the pillars can represent the foundational principles of a given discipline. And also, in the academies, the seven pillars of wisdom manifest themselves in the seven liberal arts, which had their origin in the thinking skills outlined by Plato in his Republic. Here, we propose a discussion on the pillars of the house of wisdom, from the book of James to the contemporary literature.

**Keywords:** Proverbs, Solomon, Book of James, Bernard of Clairvaux, Plato, House of Wisdom, al-Ma'mun, Seven Liberal Arts, Laurence of Arabia, Statistics, Education, Knowledge Revolution.

"Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out its seven pillars." (Proverbs, 9:1). In the Bible, Solomon tells that the House of Wisdom has its foundation on the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom [1]. On this foundation, seven pillars have been set up, or more precisely, the Wisdom has hewn them out. They are the seven dispositions that a person must have to become wiser. From Proverbs 9:1-11, we understand that these dispositions require to be cultivated, that is, to be carved in the mind and soul. The reward of this discipline is that many days and "years will be added to your life" (9:11). However, what are these pillars? In [1], it is told that the answer could be found in the book which is the "New Testament book of wisdom", the Book of James. Actually, we find the list in James 3:17. "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy." The first in the list is the main column, the purity; the other six pillars are surrounding it.

Besides this discussion in the Book of James, we find the seven pillars of the house of wisdom inspiring a large number of thinkers and authors of literary works. Of course, we find many interpretations of the Biblical text, but we can find the pillars used as allegorical symbols too. For instance, the pillars can represent the foundational principles of a given discipline. Moreover, if we consider the house of wisdom as a real place, an academy for instance, the seven pillars can be representing the liberal arts cultivated by the scholars. These arts had their origin in the thinking skills outlined by Plato in his Republic.

Here we propose a discussion on the nature of the pillars of wisdom, from the book of James to the contemporary literature.

**The soul and the house of wisdom.** The Proverbs, like the other wisdom literature of the Old Testament, that is the Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon, were thought by the early church fathers to have as their author King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived [2]. These books have received great attention from Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory the Great, Origen, and many others. To the minds of these thinkers, "the finest wisdom about the deeper issues of life", prior to the time of God's taking the human form in Jesus, "was to be found in these books" [2].

As a spiritual home of the soul, the House of Wisdom became a metaphor of the house of the conscience in the "Tractatus de interiori domo, seu de conscientia aedificanda", apocryphal text attributed to St Bernard of Clairvaux [3]. The Seven Pillars mentioned in this treatise are: bona

voluntas, memoria beneficorum Dei, cor mundum, animus liber, rectus spiritus, mens devota and ratio illuminata (in English: good will, memory of God's benefits, a clean heart, a free spirit, a right soul, a devout mind, and an enlightened reason [4]).

Some scholars consider, in a moral sense, the seven pillars as being represented by the basic virtues of a Christian life, three theological and four cardinal [5]. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, a virtue is the "habitual and firm disposition to do the good." The three theological virtues are faith, hope and charity. The four cardinal virtues are prudence, justice, temperance and courage (or fortitude). More specifically, the seven columns of the house of wisdom were also the seven rules that according to St Bernard had to be observed in a cloister: scanty food, rough clothing, continuous fasting, long vigils, manual labor, rigorous discipline, and fervent devotion [5]. St Bernard adapted them to create the rule of the Templar Knights [6].

**Bayt al-Hikma.** In the Europe of the Middle Ages, the House of Wisdom in Proverbs 9:1 was the source of many allegories in religious literature and of some rules of religious life. But in the Islam of the Golden Age, this spiritual house became a real place in Baghdad, in the House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikma), where a devout mind and an enlightened reason where two of its pillars for sure.

The House of Wisdom was created as a library for his private use by the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid, who reigned from 786 to 809 [7]. The cultural center culminated in prominence under his son al-Ma'mun (reigned 813–833), credited with its formal institution [8]. He brought many well-known scholars in his House. From the 9th to 13th centuries, Muslim scholars as well as persons having Jewish or Christian background were allowed to study in the House. There, the scholars were translating books into Arabic and preserving the originals too. They made also many remarkable original contributions to diverse fields [8,9]. Therefore, the House accumulated a great collection of world knowledge and develop a series of new discoveries. In this manner, by the middle of the ninth century, the House of Wisdom was the largest library in the world [8]. The House was destroyed in the sack of the city following the Mongol Siege of Baghdad, 1258 AD, with all other libraries in Baghdad.

Caliph al-Ma'mun, the Trustworthy [10], promoted the astronomical studies by means of new observatories. He also promoted the study of humanities and of others sciences, including mathematics, geography and cartography, medicine and alchemy. In his House of Wisdom, the Pillars were more than seven, if we imagine the pillars as the scholars that worked into. We find among them Yaqub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (801–873), Muhammad ibn Muss al-Khwarizmi (780–850), al-Jazari (1136–1206), and the Banu Musa brothers, who measured, as commissioned by al-Ma'mun, the value of the meridian arc [11-13]. Actually, it is possible that in this House some rules existed, that the scholars had to obey, to maintain the quality of the life in the institution. For what concerns the personal features of the Caliph, Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari [14] describes al-Ma'mun as a handsome man, able to talk concisely and eloquently without preparation. al-Tabari relates also of his generosity, his respect for religion, his sense of moderation, justice and his love of poetry. Actually, al-Ma'mun is described as a king of great wisdom as the Biblical Solomon was.

**Platonic Academies and liberal arts.** al-Ma'mun was aware that his House of Wisdom had a precedent in the great Library of Alexandria or even in the ancient Platonic Academy, founded by Plato in ca. 387 BC in Athens. Destroyed most likely by the Romans, the Platonic school revived in Constantinople, Antioch and Alexandria, thanks to the Neoplatonic philosophers. "At a date often cited as the end of Antiquity", emperor Justinian closed the Neoplatonic school in 529 [15]. In [15,16], we read that it has been speculated that the Academy did not altogether disappear. It continued in exile, so that its scholars could have survived into the 9th century, long enough to facilitate a revival of the Neoplatonic tradition in Baghdad, until the foundation of the House of Wisdom.

In the Platonic Academies, a person had the possibility to cultivate the liberal arts. These arts evolved during the early and late Middle Ages in the arts of Trivium and Quadrivium, becoming the proper training for the scholars of philosophy. As told in [17], the liberal arts began their career in Plato's dialogues, in the model of education outlined in his Republic; in particular, Plato anticipated the arts of the Quadrivium. Therefore, education in the liberal arts and the arts themselves had their origin in the Platonic effort of discovering the first principles, the "universal principles which are the condition of the possibility of the existence of anything and everything" [18]. The liberal arts were grammar, logic, and rhetoric (the Trivium), and arithmetic, geometry, the theory of music, and astronomy (the Quadrivium). In Plato's idea of education, the seven pillars that a thinker had to carve for his house of wisdom were the liberal arts.

**Lawrence of Arabia.** It is possible that many persons remember the seven pillars because they have found them in the title of a famous contemporary book. In December 1926, it was published the Seven Pillars of Wisdom, an autobiographical account of the experiences of Thomas Edward Lawrence, known as Lawrence of Arabia, while he was serving with rebel forces during the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Turks of 1916 to 1918. From a letter of September 1923, we know that the title is actually coming from Proverbs 9:1 [19]. Prior to the First World War, Lawrence had begun to prepare a book about seven great cities of the Middle East: Cairo, Smyrna, Constantinople, Beirut, Aleppo, Damascus and Medina [20]. This book had to be titled Seven Pillars of Wisdom. It seems that, when war broke out, the book was still incomplete. Lawrence destroyed the manuscript, but he used the title for his autobiographical account during the Arab Revolt of 1916–18.

After Lawrence's book, many publications have received the "Seven Pillars" as a part of the title. Among the books we find the seven pillars of peace [21], of popular culture [22], of health [23], of Catholicism [24], of the Bible [25] and of the ancient wisdom [26]. It is evident that Lawrence's title has stimulated the search of seven foundational principles in many fields. It is interesting also the book on architecture [27], published in 1966, where the seven pillars are seven great architects: Vitruvius, Alberti, Serlio, Palladio, De L'Orme, Villalpando, Scamozzi.

**Statistical wisdom.** The references given above are showing a great interest to categorize in seven fundamental principles - the seven pillars - the considered subjects. Such kind of work has also attracted a professor of the University of Chicago. This professor is Stephen Stigler, who has authored several books on the history of statistics, and is also known for Stigler's law of eponymy [28-30], a law which is generally used, sometimes without giving the proper framework [31]. Stigler has published, in 2016, a book entitled The Seven Pillars of Statistical Wisdom [32]. A discussion of the book is given in [33]. To answer the question "What is Statistics?", Stephen Stigler sets forth the seven foundational ideas of it. The pillars are the following. 1. Aggregation, where observations are combined, and information is created by suppressing information. 2. Information (square root of  $n$ , where  $n$  is the number of data), that is, the accuracy is related to the amount of data. 3. Likelihood, where we use probability for inference. 4. Intercomparison, where we use comparisons based on differences among the data themselves. Then we have the more technical pillars: 5. Regression, 6. Design and 7. Models and residuals.

Let us note that Stigler, in the title of his book, has not used "statistical science" or "statistics", but he has used the reference to the "wisdom". Actually the "statistical wisdom" is mentioned in some previous publications [34-36], but it is not defined. Only [37] gives a statement about. In the post entitled Statistical Wisdom, we find that "The study of many subjects brings enlightenment but only statistics brings significance", as told by Guernsey McPearson.

So, we can ask ourselves why a "statistical wisdom" requires seven pillars. Because, as explained in [38], statistics, which is the science of uncertainty, is a young sciences. "Too often,

however, the field is looked upon as a set of arcane procedures that are implemented, without much thought, by computer algorithms” [38]. The seven pillars allow to have a constitutional approach to statistics.

**Knowledge revolution.** Now, it is important to consider an Academy again, and the problem of education too. The considered Academy is the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a major library and cultural center in Alexandria, on the Egyptian shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It was built to commemorate the Library of the antiquity and to revive the studies and erudition of that ancient center. Ismail Serageldin, who was Director of this Bibliotheca, has recently proposed the seven pillars of the knowledge revolution [39], the contemporary global-scale change of the knowledge, comparable to the agricultural and industrial revolutions.

According to Serageldin, this revolution goes beyond the changing technologies and the challenges and opportunities that they are creating for knowledge and in its transmission among generations and across countries. “There are seven major features of that profound transformation”, which Serageldin defines as “The Seven Pillars of the New Knowledge Revolution”. These pillars are: 1. Parsing, Life and Organization, 2. Image and Text, 3. Humans and Machines, 4. Complexity and Chaos, 5. Computation and Research, 6. Convergence and Transformation and 7. Pluridisciplinarity and Policy [39].

To Serageldin, a diagnosis of the knowledge revolution can have profound implications on the future of our institutions of learning, not only of the universities, but of the school system in general, including also research and other supporting institutions of knowledge (libraries, archives and museums). In conclusion, it is the time to consider the following important problem, which has the House of Wisdom as its subject. We have to imagine the House in the future, even beyond the knowledge revolution, and determine its new seven pillars, that is, the new seven liberal arts which the scholars have to cultivate in it.

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