Most of us are familiar with the idea of the wise old owl, that bird being the symbol of wisdom. In ancient Rome, the owl was the representation of the goddess of wisdom, chosen because the owl, more than any other creature, was able to see clearly in the dark. Such symbolism gives great insight into that ancient understanding of wisdom. It was the ability to see beyond the obvious, accumulate hidden knowledge and understanding, and then think through to conclusions based on that accumulation. And in that world, nothing was more critical than an understanding of oneself. That, they believed, was the beginning of wisdom.

The Bible, however, presents a very different view. There are two primary words in the Hebrew language that are used in the Bible to express wisdom. The first is chakam (חכם). The word appears nearly 150 times in the Tanakh (Gen.–Mal.) and has both a secular and religious application. In secular usage, it signifies a man who was skillful, a craftsman. Those who manufactured objects belonging to the Tabernacle were considered wise, experienced in their crafts. Even a man who was skillful in making idols, or who was proficient in the magic arts, was recognized for his craftsmanship. Cleverness and shrewdness characterized this type of wisdom.

Used in the religious sense, however, chakam (חכם) excludes delusion, craftiness, shrewdness and magic. God is the source of wisdom; the wise one. The path to wisdom is not found in understanding oneself but rather in understanding that a personal, holy, righteous God has given us the absolute imperative to live in the fear of Him and in accordance with what He expects of His people. We are only truly wise when we submit ourselves to Him totally, in reverence and obedience. The wise man, chakam, recognizes that God is the source of all of his skills and projects the fear of God into everything that he does.