

MTA - OLD TESTAMENT
THE WISDOM BOOKS



Introduction

- Wisdom writing in the Old Testament is found primarily in the following books.
 - Job
 - Proverbs
 - Ecclesiastes
 - Song of Songs
 - Several Psalms (e.g. 1, 19, 37, 73, 119)
- Elements of wisdom can be found in Genesis, Deuteronomy, and the Prophets; note connection with Hebrew poetry and wisdom
- Jews include Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) and Wisdom of Solomon

DEFINING WISDOM

Heb: חֵכְמָה *Hokhmah* = skillful living (Ex 28:3; 1 Ki 3:12; Prov 10:8, 11:29, etc.)

Wisdom works! Wisdom makes sense!

- A good name is better than fine perfume (Ecc 7:1)
- Do horses run on rocks, or does one plow the sea with oxen? (Am 6:12)
- The content of wisdom literature “has to do mainly with human conduct in society before God...The goal is to mold the character of the individual.” (R. Murphy).
- Being wise meant a search for and a maintenance of “order.” God embedded order and truth within all of reality. Humans are to seek for that insight and live in harmony with the cosmos.
- Character of OT wisdom
 - Based on observations and reflections
 - Has a social setting – family/village, formal education
 - International character – very similar material found in Egypt and Mesopotamia¹

JOB

TITLE & DESCRIPTION

- Heb: *Iyyob*, Gk & Lat: *Iob*
- The book of Job is about the man Job, a virtuous and upright man, and his struggle to make sense of what seems to be unnecessary and undeserved suffering.
- Reflects on suffering; challenges traditional wisdom assumptions.

¹ On the international character of wisdom: The Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope* is very similar to Prov. 22:17-24:22. In Mesopotamia, ancient documents have been found which have close parallels to Job and Ecclesiastes.

AUTHOR & DATE

- Author unknown: some suggestions – Solomon, Elihu, Ezra, one of the prophets; one suggestion from the Talmud is Moses
- For the events: A patriarchal date? (ca. 2000-1800 BC)
 - Job's life span (140 years *after* the events)
 - Wealth measured in livestock
 - Social unit is patriarchal-family clan
 - Job acts as "priest" to his family
 - No references to Israel, Exodus, or Mosaic Law

SETTING

- Book has the feel of folk literature²
- Job 1:1 mentions "Uz" (see Lam 4:21)
- Southeast Palestine; exact location is unknown
- Note that Ezekiel 14:14, 20 and James 5:11 indicate that Job was an historical person.
- Although the precise date when Job lived and the location of his home are unknown, this is not important to unlocking the book's timeless message.

OUTLINE

The Dilemma of Job	(chs 1-2)
The Debates of Job	(chs 3-37)
The Deliverance of Job	(chs 38-42)

More Detailed Outline

Prologue	1-2
Job's lament	3
Conversation with 3 friends	4-31
Elihu's speech	32-37
God's Response	38:1-42:6
Epilogue	42:7-14

THEMES

- The Righteous Sufferer
- Satan and evil
- The Sovereignty of God

TEACHING/COMMENTARY

- Job's dilemma
 - Blessed by God (1:1-5)

² Gives impression of great antiquity (most folk literature does), but also shows points of contact in language and theme with post-exilic period.

- Subjected to conflict (1:6-2:10)
- Satan's charge: No one loves God from pure motives, but only for blessing (1:10-11).

Chapters 3-37

- Job's friends mourn for a week.
- In the debates, his friends insist that Job must be suffering because of his sin.
- Job responds to their simplistic assumptions with increasing fervor.

The Debates

- Eliphaz – relies on experience
- Bildad – relies on tradition
- Zophar – relies on assumption
- Elihu – relies on God's character

Chapters 38-42

- Finding the cause of suffering is not the way to cope with suffering.³
- Believers can go on trusting God even when some of their most urgent questions remain unanswered.
- We are called upon to trust God when all appearances are contrary.

PSALMS

REVIEW

- The Book of Psalms...
 - A collection of lyric poems
 - Contains 150 psalms based on MT
 - Composed by different authors over many generations
 - Associated with Temple setting (United Kingdom Period)
- The Major Types of Psalms
 - Lament/complaint - conveys mourning and petitioning to God in times of need
 - Thanksgiving - a prayer of gratitude for blessing, deliverance, or answered requests
 - Praise/hymn – a joyful song, giving God glory

WISDOM IN PSALMS

- Psalms 1 and 2 introduce the Psalter as well as the subject of "choices."
- Wisdom psalms teach about life and making good choices. Examples: 1, 15, 19, 34, 37, 49, 73, 78, 91, 111-112, 119, 127-128. Others would include 10, 12, 32, 50, 82, 139.
- Sampling: 10:1-4; 50:16-22; 78:1-8

³ God showcases the mystery of creation before Job: takes humans out of center; there is no simple cause and effect humans can understand. Job humbles up, repents and acknowledges his finitude.

PROVERBS

TITLE & DESCRIPTION

- Heb: *Mishle Shelomoh* (=Proverbs of Solomon)
- Grk: *Paroimiai Salomontos* (=Proverbs of Solomon)
- Lat: *Liber Proverbiorum* (=Book of Proverbs)
- Proverbs is a collection of poems and wise sayings representing the wisdom from generations of Israelite history.

AUTHOR & DATE

- Solomon is traditionally regarded as author of: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs.
- Solomon's wisdom tradition:
 - 1 Kings 3:1-15 – Dream at Gibeon: asks for wisdom to rule well.
 - 1 Kings 3:16-28 – Judgment between two women illustrates wisdom.
 - 1 Kings 4:29-34 – Skill at composing proverbs (3000) and songs (1005)!
 - 1 Kings 10:1-13 – Queen of Sheba visits to test him with questions.

SETTING

- Family setting – among clans and elders and among parents
- Royal court – among scribes or “scholars-in-training” (e.g., men of Hezekiah, Prov 25:1); elite schools?⁴

OUTLINE

Purpose of Proverbs	1:1-1:7
Proverbs to Youth	1:8-9:18
Proverbs of Solomon	10:1-24:34
Other Proverbs (Hezekiah)	25:1-29:27
Words of Agur	30:1-30:33
Words of Lemuel	31:1-31:31

THEMES

- Ways of wisdom (includes hard work, diligence, humility, watching your tongue, frugality, marital fidelity); see Steve Kinnard's book for indexed proverbs
- Ways of folly/wickedness
- Success (note the relation to happiness, health, good family life, respect in community)

TYPES OF WISDOM WRITING

1. Practical/conventional traditional wisdom
 - Practical advice for the art of successful living
 - Best exemplified in Proverbs.
2. Speculative/critical wisdom

⁴ Wisdom teachers were employed to train royal sons and government officials. This was clearly seen in ancient Egypt; Solomon may have brought this practice to Israel.

More cerebral approach; challenges assumptions
Exemplified in Job and Ecclesiastes.

TEACHING/COMMENTARY

Proverbs 1:1-7

- 1:2 has “wisdom” (*hokhmah*) and “instruction” (*musar*)⁵
- The book clearly spells out its purpose.
 1. To impart moral discernment and discretion
 2. To develop mental clarity and perception

“Wise ways”

1:7; 9:10; 15:33 – fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.
2:20-22 – way of the upright vs. way of the wicked.
3:1-2 – wisdom’s reward: length of days and abundant welfare.
5:1-23 – sexual fidelity, avoiding adultery (the “strange” woman).
6:6-11 – lesson of the diligence of the ant vs. laziness of the slacker.
10:4-5, 26 – slack hand vs. diligence; laziness irritates one’s employer.
11:12-13 – belittling another vs. silence; gossiping vs. keeping confidence.
11:22 – being wise is being discrete
16:23-24; 18:7, 21 – mastering the tongue.
23:29-35 – avoiding drunkenness.

Wisdom Personified

Prov. 8:22-36 – Personified Wisdom speaks; she is the first of God’s creation and the “master craftsman” by which God made heaven and earth.⁶

Prov. 9 – Lady Wisdom is depicted as a beautiful, alluring woman, inviting the simple ones to come eat her bread and drink her wine; contrasted with Lady Folly

ECCLESIASTES

TITLE & DESCRIPTION

- Heb: *Qoheleth* (=“one who gathers or assembles”)
- Gk: *Ecclesiastes* (=“preacher”)
- Lat: *Ecclesiastes* (=“speaker before an assembly”)
- The book explores meaning and value in human experience (a “royal quest”).

AUTHOR & DATE

- The author calls himself “Teacher” (NIV) or “Preacher” (ESV), and “son of David, king in Jerusalem.” (1:1, 12).

⁵ The basic unit of the book is the *mashal* = “proverb,” that is, a pithy saying (1:6). Pl. *meshalim* is the Hebrew title of the book.

⁶ Note connections with Logos concept of John 1.

- Solomon is traditionally regarded as author of: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs.
- Solomon’s qualifications:
 - Wisest man who ever taught in Jerusalem (1:16; 1 Ki 4:29-30)
 - Fit the Qoheleth’s explorations and accomplishments.
 - The proverbs in this book are similar to those in Proverbs.

SETTING

- Probably written late in Solomon’s life, about 935 B.C.
- There are no references to historical events other than to personal aspects of the Qoheleth’s life.
- The location was Jerusalem (1:1, 12, 16), the seat of Israel’s rule and authority.
- Biblical wisdom has affinities with writings of Near Eastern societies.
- Examples include:
 - From Egypt: “A Dispute over Suicide,” “Protests of the Eloquent Peasant”
 - From Mesopotamia: “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom,” “Babylonian Theodicy,” “The Dialogue of Pessimism”

CANONICITY

- Some have questioned the canonicity of Ecclesiastes because of it is quite unlike all other books of the Bible.
- “Qoheleth affirms the concept of a time for everything. If one accepts that claim, surely there is a time for not only the ancestral stories of Genesis, the holy songs of the Psalms, and the bold proclamation of the prophets, but also the relentless questioning of the Qoheleth.” (E. Huwiler)

OUTLINE

The Quest	Chs. 1-3
The Findings/Reflections	Chs. 4-10
The Call to Decision	Chs. 11:1-12:8
Conclusion	Chs. 12:9-14

THEMES

“Under the SUN”

- 1:9 Nothing is new under the sun
- 1:14 All deeds are meaningless under the sun
- 6:12 Man is mortal under the sun
- 9:3 All men die under the sun
- 12:2 Life will cease under the sun

“All is vanity and chasing after the wind.”⁷

⁷ “Vanity” is from the Hebrew *hebel* – lit., “vapor,” “breath,” “puff of air.”

TEACHING/COMMENTARY

- Preface states thesis (1:2-11)
- Qoheleth is searching for meaning in life: “What do people *gain* from all their toil?”
- Finds nothing: Life is in perpetual motion, yet there is nothing to show for it, no profit, no net gain.
A “royal experiment” (1:12-2:26).
 - Qoheleth claims to have tried everything and found nothing that satisfies (1:12-18).
 - The testing of pleasure, work, wealth, and fame (2:1-11).
 - The testing of wisdom (2:12-17). Same fate befalls wise and foolish.
 - Conclusion: despair – there is no gain from all one’s efforts (2:18-23).
- Chapter 12
Epilogue (12:9-14)
 - Added by a pupil of the Teacher?
 - Pays tribute to Qoheleth’s wisdom: his words are like goads – sharp, hard to take, but ultimately useful.⁸
 - “Fear God” – not just the conclusion but the perspective of the entire work! (cf. 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12-13)

SONG OF SONGS

TITLE & DESCRIPTION

- Heb: *Shir Hashirim* (=Song of Songs)
- Gk: *Asma Asmaton*
- Lat: *Canticum Canticorum*
- Song of Songs (or “Canticles”) is an extended love song written like a drama.

AUTHOR & DATE

- Solomon is traditionally regarded as author of: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs. In Canticles, Solomon is specifically mentioned seven times (1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11-12).
- There is evidence of royal luxury and rich imported goods (e.g., 3:6-11).
- Note Solomon’s giftedness with words in 1 Kings 4:32-33.

SETTING

- Canticles features poetry in dialogue.
- Arrangement is like scenes in a one-act drama with three main speakers: the bride (a Shulamite maiden), the king (Solomon), and a chorus (daughters of Jerusalem).

OUTLINE

In the King’s Chambers	1:1-2:7
A Springtime Trip	2:8-3:5
The Groom Describes his Bride	3:6-5:1
The Bride Describes her Groom	5:2-6:3
The King Praises his Bride	6:4-7:9

⁸ Here is an acknowledgement of “cynical truths” as essential for true faith in God.

The Desires of the Bride
Love and Homecoming

7:10-8:4
8:5-14

THEMES

- Human love (including sexual love)
- Warnings; to set love in its proper context of marriage

INTERPRETATION

- Allegorical or Historical? Allegory – man/woman symbolize God and his people; Historical – straightforward love song
- The Song of Songs is full of repetitions—whole verses, pairs of verses, lines, images, epithets, and even the echo of an entire scene. These repetitions have the initial effect of drawing the text together into a whole and of encouraging the reader to make sense of the Song as a book. (E. Huwiler)

TEACHING/COMMENTARY

- 1:1-4, In the King's Chambers
- Main characters are introduced: woman, man, ladies (of the court).
- The Shulamite woman speaks of Solomon.

- 2:7 – proceed with caution
- 2:8-13 - recalling his marriage proposal?
- 4:1-7 – enjoyment of physical bodies
- 7:10-11 – mutual desire in marriage
- 8:1-4 – desire for closer relationship
- 8:7 – power of love

Conclusion: The Wisdom Books

- The wisdom books of the Bible are vital for the Christian canon.
- Aside from gaining practical wisdom, studying these books reminds us of the importance of following God and his commands.

For further study:

Bullock, C. Hassell, *An Introduction to Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago, IL: Moody).
Kidner, Derek, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press).