**JOB and ECCLESIASTES:** Asking hard questions . . .

In counterpoint to the **proverbial wisdom** of **Proverbs** is the **speculative wisdom** of **Job** and **Ecclesiastes**. **Job** is a dramatic poem discussing the question of the role of suffering in the life of a righteous man. **Ecclesiastes** is an essay on the ultimate meaning (chief end) of man and is a mixture of poetry and prose. "Between them, the three books clearly cover aspects of existence which no-one can afford to overlook: the demands of practical good management; the enigma of calamities that are beyond control or explanation; and the tantalizing hollowness and brevity of human life." (Derek Kidner, The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, p. 116.)

**Job** is a drama that deals with one of the great problems of life: the problem of evil and suffering. Job’s “friends” argue from the promises and warnings of the Law and the proverbs and from a prophetic moral stance, but over estimate their grasp of truth, misapply what they know and their minds are closed to contradictory facts - providing little comfort. A warning to us that we don’t know all the answers and must not be smug in our orthodoxy.

The book gives 5 answers: it is a test of character (1,2), it comes as a result of sin (3-11), It is a means of discipline (32-37), it is a call for faith in God (38-42:6), and it is an encouragement to prayer (42:7ff). (See Henry, Biblical Expositor, p.386f.)

**Ecclesiastes** asks whether life is worth living at all. Is it the writer’s own confession of the “vanity” (the word - used 30 times in the book - means “transient, empty, futile”) of his life as he debates within himself, or a challenge to the man of the world to think through his position to its bitter ends - a “searching criticism of human self-sufficiency”? It explores the cynical and fatalistic secular wisdom of a “practical atheist”.

This essay explores the possibilities of living life without reference to God - trying humanism (1:12 - 18), hedonism (2:1-11), work (2:17-4:16), religion (5:1-7), materialism (5:8-6:12) and learning (7:1-29) and finding each empty and unsatisfying.

In **Job**, the complete utterances of each of the main-characters: Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu should be considered for their basic assumptions and arguments. In **Ecclesiastes**, each “philosophy” should be examined, keeping in mind that they are mostly found wanting. “Remember that both Ecclesiastes and Job were included by God in the Bible partly to remind us that there is very little that is automatic about the good and bad events that take place in our lives.”(Fee and Stuart, How to Read the Bible, p. 220)

"There is somewhat of a problem in studying the subject of the character of God in the book of Job, for much of the book is fallacious in its revelation. We can say this reverently, of course. All of the book is inspired and actually all of the characters except Satan express some elements of truth, but at least the speeches of the three comforters are not normative for theology. Job, himself, as we have seen, grew in his faith and understanding. Surely Job's idea of life after death progressed greatly during the course of his trial. Some of the things Job said about God are true. Some things are not... We may remark that the case is somewhat like that in Ecclesiastes. There also is much in the book that is preliminary to the conclusion. The author tries various philosophies and finds them false. He is shut up to the final conclusion that the chief end of man is to fear God and keep his commandments. So also in Job, it is the final answer that we want. It was the ultimate vision of God that satisfied the patriarch's heart."  

(Laird Harris, an article in Grace Journal, Fall, 1977, p.21)
**The Song of Songs:** Singing the beauty of marriage...

*The Song of Songs* presents the beauty of pure love between man and wife. For our modern eyes "shockingly explicit", some have sought to reduce it to an allegory of the love between Christ and the Church. On one hand it should reveal to us the freedom and beauty of pure love and mutual devotion between husband and wife, on the other it is not an allegory, but a "parable of the divine love which is the background and source of all true human love." (Carl Henry, The Biblical Expositor, p. 488) Certainly, the position taken concerning whether it is a literary composition or some form of allegory or type or poem having its roots in a real human relationship will determine how it is interpreted. Ephesians 5 can be taken as New Testament support for it as a description of true human love mirroring the love of God for his church.

Why is it in the Bible? "Whom to love and how to love, the two issues with the Song is concerned are among the most basic choices in life, and the ability to make godly decisions is vitally important to every believer." (Fee and Stuart, How to Read the Bible, p. 226) Duvall and Hayes suggest "It is difficult to build a great love relationship with only logic and rational thought. The Song of Songs celebrates the wild, irrational, mushy and corny aspects of true love. This book suggests that in the marketplace husbands and wives need to be the quiet and hardworking people of Proverbs, but that once the lights go out in the privacy of their home, they need to be the crazy, madly-in-love, slightly irrational couple of the Song of Songs." (Grasping God's Word, p. 391.)

The *Song of Songs* teaches us that sex within marriage is good in the eyes of God. (Gen 1:31, 2:20-25; Hebrews13:4; 1 Cor 7:1 - 5; Eph 5:25 - 33)

"Be aware that the song focuses on very different values than those of our modern culture. Today "experts" talk about sex techniques, but almost never about virtuous romance, the attraction of a man to a woman that leads to lifelong marriage. Such experts may advocate self-indulgence, even as the Song emphasizes just the opposite. Our culture encourages people to fulfill themselves, whatever their sexual tastes, whereas the Song is concerned with how one person can respond faithfully to the attractiveness of and fulfill the needs of another. In most of the modern world, romance is though of as something that precedes marriage. In the Song, romance is something that should continue throughout and actually characterize marriage." (Fee and Stuart, p. 230) See my study, "The Language of the Lovers in the Song of Songs" for some communication principles for married couples.

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**The Song of Songs:**

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An excellent study of the *Song of Songs* is *Romantic Lovers: The Intimate Marriage* by David and Carole Hocking. Used copies can be purchased on line.

Also see my web site on “What does the Bible Say about Being Married” and its Bibliography page of Books on Marriage by Christian writers.  http://www.eldrbarry.net/marriage/clas/mc00a.htm