

WISDOM LITERATURE - Proverbs: Making right choices...

The purpose of the wisdom literature is to instruct in making good choices in life. They teach us that God is concerned about the day by day details of living - that they are of real significance to the godly man. The purpose of the wisdom literature is spelled out clearly in Prov. 1:1-7 and Eccl. 12:9-14: "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.*" Proverbs, written in Solomon's middle years (though a substantial part of Proverbs is of other authorship), is made up of many verse couplets, triplets, etc. that set forth practical wisdom.

Gleason Archer sums its purpose up: "*The characteristic type of mashal or proverb in this book is the balanced antithesis which incisively contrasts the wise man and the fool, the good man and the wicked, true value and false, in such a way as to set forth the two sides of truth in clearest opposition to each other and thus perform an incisive didactic function. The constant preoccupation of the book is with the elemental antagonisms of obedience vs. rebellion, industry vs. laziness, prudence vs. presumption and so on. These are presented as to put before the reader a clear-cut choice, leaving him no ground for wretched compromise or vacillating indecision.*" (A Survey of O.T. Introduction, p. 452)

The purpose and nature of the Proverbs have some effect on our interpretation of it. We must not forget they are verse nor that they are concerned with day-by-day holiness. Nor must we separate them from the source of true wisdom, Jesus Christ. "Wisdom" is personified in the first 9 chapters of Proverbs. It is more than knowledge, it becomes a person. Jesus said "*But wisdom is proved right by her actions*" Paul says: "*Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*". A commentator on Proverbs says: "*It is in the life of the believing community,, in the study of the Holy Scriptures, that a person is filled with the Holy Spirit and discovers the wisdom of life. As such, the book of proverbs provided one of the most comprehensive statements of the divine wisdom anywhere in the sacred book. Its message is timeless. But it can never be used apart from him toward whom the whole message points- Jesus Christ. Unless we move beyond the wise laws of the book to the Person of wisdom, our study will but lead to folly. In seeking wisdom, we seek Christ.*" (Larsen, Wise Up and Live, p. 232)

Much of the book of Proverbs appears to have no clear organized structure, however...

Proverbs 1 - 9 offers **the fatherly approach** to wisdom and personifies It in Chapter 8.

Proverbs 10 - 22 offers **a plain man's approach** of sentence sayings generally attributed to Solomon. Chapters 10 - 15 are mostly antithetical contrasts ("but...") and Chapters 16-22 are mostly synonymous or synthetic sayings.

Proverbs 22:17 - 24:22 and **24:23 - 34** have **two groups of sayings by wise men**.

Proverbs 25 - 29 offers **a ruler's approach** and consists of sentence sayings of Solomon compiled by Hezekiah's men and often topically grouped into a number of little clusters.

Proverbs 30 gives **an observer's approach** - notable for its disclaimer of wisdom and numerical sayings.

Proverbs 31 offers **the womanly approach** - and includes the alphabetic acrostic of the godly woman in vss 10 - 31.

Guidelines for the study of the wisdom literature:

- Respect the difference between a proverb and the moral law. Proverbs should not be absolutized into commandments for every situation, or taken as “guarantees” from God. By their nature, they are generalized examples of applying wisdom to specific situations, rather than setting forth universal principles. Some even contradict others - examples: Prov 26:4,5; “A common mistake in biblical interpretation and application is to give a proverbial saying the weight or force of a moral absolute they reflect principles of wisdom for godly living. They do not reflect moral laws that are to be applied absolutely to every conceivable life situation.” (Sproul, Knowing Scripture, p. 89.)
- Proverbs are worded to be memorable, rather than theologically accurate or technically precise. The same qualities that make them easy to remember make them pithy, but inexact statements that are easily misapplied. The Proverbs and Sayings are not intended to be exhaustive, applying to every situation. Some Sayings are didactic instructions, but some are merely experiential observations.
- Because they are verse we can expect an extensive use of imagery and figures of speech - such as personification, metaphor, simile, overstatement, understatement, etc. These need to be handled carefully. These will prove to be a rich source of insights, calling our attention to things the author desires to highlight in the text.
- Because much of Proverbs is a collection of often unrelated verses, the remote context must be searched out with careful use of concordance and examination of parallel proverbs and expressions and considered. Study all the references to the “fool”, “the sluggard”, etc. before drawing conclusions.
- Wisdom should be read as a collection - wrongly used it seems to justify a crass materialistic lifestyle and selfish short-sighted behavior. “*Bits and snatches of wisdom teaching taken out of context can sound profound and seem practical, but can be easily misapplied. . . . do not engage in the kind of wisdom Job’s friends did, equating worldly success with righteousness in God’s eyes.*” Fee and Stuart, p. 207 and 222.
- An understanding of how Hebrew poetry is constructed is important. The determination of the forms of parallelism used and the comparisons and contrasts that are an integral part of it is an important part of interpretation. Most proverbs consist in the Hebrew of just six or seven words - two stanzas of about 3 word “beats” each.
- Be aware of the wide range of literary conventions and styles used in Wisdom literature: **Alphabetic acrostics, Numerical sayings, “Blessed” sayings, “Better” sayings, Comparisons and Admonitions (both commands and prohibitions), Addresses of father to son - “listen to me”, riddles, parables, allegories, dialogues** (most extensively in Job), etc.
- Follow carefully any lines of argument. Job’s comforters seem very orthodox and “churchy” as do their seemingly “pious” arguments, until God condemns them. Until the last two verses, Ecclesiastes looks at life as if God does not play a direct, intervening role and as if there is nothing beyond death.
- Many of the Proverbs need to be “translated” into our cultural situations. The degree to which we take each one literally, figuratively or parabolically has to be carefully weighed.

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)

The **Song of Songs** teaches us that sex within marriage is good in the eyes of God. (Gen 1:31, 2:20-25; Hebrews 13:4; 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 thought 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)

The Song of Songs:
Courtship (1:1 - 3:5)
Wedding (3:6 - 5:1)
First Fight (5:2 - 6:13)
Maturing in their relationship (7:1 - 8:4)
Defining Love (8:5 - 7)
Preparation for Marriage (8:8 - 14)

An excellent study of the **Song of Songs** is Romantic Lovers: The Intimate Marriage by David and Carole Hocking.