Wisdom Introduction

Because the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs seem so different from other books of the Bible, we have often given them the title of Wisdom Literature or described them as part of a Wisdom Tradition. At times, they seem supportive of Israel’s faith and, at times, they seem to express skepticism. As a result, it is problematic for some Christians to read, especially, Ecclesiastes and Job.

Since I believe the New Testament is trustworthy when it reads that all scripture is inspired by God and useful for discipling God’s people, I happen to believe that the cynicism and skepticism expressed in portions of the Wisdom Literature has a purpose in affirming our faith. I believe it is a tragedy that the bulk of the book of Job (other than the story itself that forms the bookends of the book) and most of Ecclesiastes are neglected by believers. I do not agree with a prominent radio preacher that Ecclesiastes is simply the account of a non-believer.

So, let’s try to figure out what wisdom, in the biblical sense, actually means. There is an obvious starting place in the first chapter of Proverbs (1:7) that is often repeated, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” In other words, “Go with the stream as God has ordered it and you will be successful and happy. Go against it and you will only destroy yourself.” [Johnson, L. D*., Israel’s Wisdom: Learn and Live: Introducing the Wisdom Books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1975), p. 10.]

But the word for “wisdom” has many different meanings in the Bible and it is a mistake to see all of wisdom as inherently positive. As with life, it is a mixed bag and it depends on one’s response to God’s counsel and direction how beneficial that “wisdom” may be. One aspect of wisdom is just the practical ability to accomplish something. Here’s a sample of how wisdom meant “skillful” in several biblical passages or verses.

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| **Reference** | **Meaning of Wisdom** |
| **1 Kings 5:6** | **Sidonians wise in timber cutting** |
| **Exodus 35:30-33** | **Bezalel's metallurgical craftsmanship** |
| **Exodus 35:34-35** | **Oholiab's craftsmanship with cloth** |
| **Ezekiel 28:4-5** | **[Secular] wisdom increased wealth** |
| **Isaiah 28:24-29** | **God gives farmer practical sense** |
| **Jeremiah 9:17** | **Female "embalmers" for funerals** |

Of course, in line with our earlier quotation from Dr. Johnson, we shouldn’t worry about how mundane, apparently secular, and practical the idea of wisdom in the Bible may be. “Wisdom based on human skill or ingenuity was a gift of God, part of his order in creation. But without awe of God and obedience to him, wisdom was doomed to defeat because of pride and presumption.” [Lasor, William S., *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 458.] Another scholar puts it more succinctly: “One becomes competent and expert as far as the orders in the life are concerned only if one begins with knowledge of God.” [Rad, Gerhard von, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 67.]

But, wisdom in the Bible can also be a two-edged sword. Remember that in Genesis 3:6, after the serpent had tempted Eve, the woman saw the fruit as something desired to make her wise? And remember in 2 Samuel 13:3 when David’s son Amnon was lusting after his sister Tamar that it was a fellow named Jonadab whose “wisdom” gave Amnon the idea to pretend to be sick so that he could rape his half-sister when she came to nurse him.

In 2 Samuel 14, Joab wanted to effect a peace between David and his rebel son Absalom. So, he hired a wise-woman from Tekoa to disguise herself, tell a parable-like story about her own family, and then, beg King David to reunite with Absalom. It works, but it’s kind of underhanded. 2 Samuel 20 talks about a circle of the wise in the village of Abel who end up parlaying with General Joab during his siege and avoiding their destruction by decapitating the rebel named Sheba and throwing his head over the wall. This may not be what we usually think of in regard to wisdom, but it is part of the tradition.

Of course, wisdom is also represented by an encyclopedic knowledge of nature and human nature, as represented by Solomon’s three thousand proverbs and 1,005 songs (1 Kings 4:29-34). Of course, even though we have references to these proverbs and songs, as well as references that some of the Proverbs in Proverbs were copied from those of Solomon, the reference in 1 Kings 4 suggests that Solomon categorized such things as trees from cedars to hyssop and beasts, birds, reptiles, and fish. Such lists and descriptions don’t seem to be represented in the Bible as we have it today [Crenshaw, James L. *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), p. 50.]

But perhaps the most important use of wisdom in the Bible is the idea of moral discernment, determining right from wrong. As in 1 Kings 3:9, 12, Solomon asks God to help him be able to determine between good and evil. In turn, God grants that promise by saying, “Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind,…” [Revised Standard Version]

But, where does the wisdom tradition really begin? First of all, we know that nearly every culture has one and that practical observations are passed down in relatively short and pithy sayings. For example:

* **“The earth is a beehive, we all enter by the same door but live in  
  different cells.” [Bantu proverb]**
* **“If the people must be ever fearful of death, then there will always be an executioner.” [Lao Tzu]**
* **“For two feasts Baal hates, / three the Rider of the Clouds:    
  A feast of shame and a feast of contention,  
  And a feast of the lewdness of maids.” [Ugaritic]**
* **“Dripping water hollows out stone, not through force but through persistence.” [Ovid]**

“Every nation with a culture has devoted itself to the care and literary cultivation of this experiential knowledge and has carefully gathered its statements, especially in the form of sentence-type proverbs.” [Rad, Gerhard von, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 10.] Proverbs 4:1-5 suggests that this type of practical knowledge was originally passed along via the family. So, wisdom seems to have a lot of emphasis on nature. It is observational and experiential in nature. It is so down to earth that much of it seems to be “humanistic,” though Israel’s wisdom tends to find God even in difficult circumstances.

One way to realize that “wisdom” can be found within all cultures is to look at material from other cultures and compare it with that of Israel’s biblical tradition. When I’m introducing this, I like to play a game of “Bible or NOT Bible” as indicated on slides 7-13. This exercise demonstrates that Israel had something in common with Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Canaanite wisdom literature. Why?

Well, considering the fact that Proverbs 22:17-23:11 reads almost exactly like the Instruction of Amenemope [sometimes, Amen-em-Opet] which dates back to the 6th century BC(E) predates it in Egyptian tradition and that we have seen similar sentiments in the Gilgamesh tablets from 13th-12th century BC(E) to what we see in Ecclesiastes, it appears that Israel was influenced from both sides. In fact, if you look at a map of the Near East, Israel was often caught in the middle. In fact, the oldest peace treaty known in the world is between the Egyptians and the Hittites at the conclusion of the battle of Kadesh in what is now Israel (the tablet is in the museum in Istanbul).

So, it makes perfect sense that when Solomon, whose primary wife seems to have been Egyptian, opted to organize the administration of his ever-enlarging kingdom, he would have drawn from the experience of both Egypt and Mesopotamia. Particularly in Egypt, there were numerous wise men who served as viziers in the royal court and scribes which maintained annals, inventories, laws, literature, pronouncements, protocols, religious texts, and tax records. As Solomon’s kingdom grew, it would have been natural to adopt and adapt such a useful functionality.

But before we get to the institutionalization of wisdom in the royal court, let’s not forget that practical wisdom is often passed down from father and mother to son and daughter. Proverbs 4 speaks of the instruction from a father to son, and we read the term, “My son,” often in the wisdom literature. “To begin with, ‘old wisdom’ concerned itself with norms of individual behavior conducive to a good and satisfying life for that person, and conducive to a good and satisfying life for that person, and to community well-being. This begins with parental instruction and develops into more formalized cultural and moral training for a successful career. This kind of wisdom was mundane, empirical, practical, and prudential in subject matter and tone.” [Scott, R. B. Y., *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1971), pp. 137-138.]

As Roland Murphy explained: “Obviously, Israel did not wait until Solomon to have its share of experiential wisdom. The wisdom cultivated by Solomon and the men of Hezekiah must necessarily reflect the ethos of the people for whom it was destined. It is reasonable therefore to correlate the court activity with the experiential wisdom of the people.” [Murphy, Roland E., “Wisdom—Theses and Hypotheses” in Gammie, John G. et. Al. (eds*.), Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), p. 37.]

Some argue that the verses in Proverbs dealing with proper behavior at court (Proverbs 16:10-15 and 25:1-5) offer concrete evidence of both a scribal school and trained courtiers in Israel’s royal court. Others argue that these instructions may have come from external politics. Those who don’t believe in trained counselors and scribes as functionaries in Israel’s royal court have trouble with the evidence in Jeremiah 18:18a [RSV] (“Then they said, ‘Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah, for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. …”) or Ezekiel 7:26 [RSV] (“Disaster comes upon disaster, rumor follows rumor; they seek a vision from the prophet, but the law perishes from the priest, and counsel from the elders, …”). Both verses seem to point to priests and prophets having a religious function, but counselors (“the wise”) having a political/practical function whether at court (or even in the city gate where some elders acted as judges and decision-makers).

Regarding these verses, “Many critics have seen in this statement an allusion to three classes of leaders in ancient Israel: priests, prophets, and sages. The essential function of each professional group is thus captured in a single word. Priests promulgate instruction (torah), prophets proclaim the divine word (dabar), and sages give counsel (‘esah).” [Crenshaw, James L. *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), pp. 27-28.] Similarly, “In Jeremiah 18:18 and Ezekiel 7:26 the wise man, or elder, is named along with the priest and the prophet as one of the three sources of authoritative guidance possessed by the community: …” [Scott, R. B. Y., *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1971), p. 4.]. Even Stuart Weeks who doesn’t believe the verse indicates a professional sage admits: “Priest and prophet are found regularly together in Jeremiah, and elsewhere, as representatives of the religious establishment, which is why it is tempting to see this as a mere extension to include another group.” [Weeks, Stuart, Early Israelite Wisdom (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 88.]. Personally, I think Weeks is being entirely too careful in overlooking a reasonable conclusion.

Forms of Wisdom Literature

Although there are some prose examples of wisdom, such as parables or fables (and the introduction and conclusion of the biblical book of Job), most forms of wisdom have a poetic basis. Interestingly enough, though, one of the most common forms of wisdom in other parts of the world seems to rarely be found in the Hebrew Bible. That form would be riddles. We know they were known because the Queen of Sheba tests Solomon’s wisdom with riddles (1 Kings 10:1-13). Samson uses a riddle in Judges 14:14 (“Out of the eater came something to eat; Out of the strong came something sweet.” [RSV] However, unless one considers the allegory on old age in Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 or the one on marital fidelity in Proverbs 5:15-23 to be built off extended riddles, we don’t see pure riddles in the biblical wisdom literature [Crenshaw, *OT Wisdom*, p. 37.]

We also don’t see any fables in the wisdom literature. The only biblical fable of which I can comment is from Judges 9 where Jotham uses a fable of trees electing a king to discourage the general populace from actually desiring a king. Other cultures do use a form called onomasticon (lists of names or types) and Solomon is reputed to have written such regarding trees and animals. In addition, we see a few of these lists in Proverbs, in particular. For example:  
  
**“The leech has two daughters;  
‘Give, give,’ they cry.  
Three things are never satisfied;  
 four never say, ‘Enough’:  
Sheol, the barren womb,  
 the earth ever thirsty for water,  
and the fire which never says,  
 ‘Enough.’”  
 Proverbs 30:15-16 [RSV]**

Notice that in the list just quoted, you have the three-to-four pattern. Amos, the 8th century prophet from Tekoa (where the wise woman who disguised herself to appear before King David was from), used the three-to-four pattern in the first two chapters of his prophecy to express the rebellions of the nations around and including Israel.

Yet, by far the most common form of wisdom literature is what we call proverbs. The Hebrew word is משל and it comes closest to our English word, simile. The “m” sound represents the word for “what” and the “sh” and “l” sound represents “like” or “as.” So, it is a fertile ground for learning by analogy.

The verbal root for the word is the word for “ruling.” Perhaps, the idea is that if one can master these similes, one is fit to be a master over something or someone else. It might also be that wisdom is largely for those who are, at least, wealthy if not for the ruling class.

We sometimes see this as representing identity or equivalence, such as: “A worker’s appetite works for him; his mouth urges him on.” (Proverbs 16:26 [RSV]) In this case, appetite and mouth are equivalent in being the stimulus that causes a worker to accomplish what she or he needs to accomplish.

This sometimes expresses non-identity or paradox as in: “He who is sated loathes honey, but to one who is hungry, everything bitter is sweet.” (Proverbs 27:7 [RSV]) The comparison demonstrates how one’s situation affects how one perceives even the simple things in life.

It could reflect an analogy like a lazy person doesn’t go very far, much like a door swinging on its hinges. “As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed.” (Proverbs 26:14 [RSV])

In Ecclesiastes 1, only a half-dozen verses after Qoheleth asks, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (Ecclesiastes 1:3 [RSV]), we have a “headline” followed by three similar conditions using three different senses: “All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfying with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.” (Ecclesiastes 1:8 [RSV]) In other words, “What’s the use…?”

Sometimes what would normally be a comparison is a continuation of an idea. An object, creature, or individual is personified to show what should happen (as either a warning or exhortation). “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler; and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.” (Proverbs 20:1 [RSV])

Another form is something that we say when we studied the New Testament book of Hebrews. It is the “Better than” saying such as Ecclesiastes 7:1: “A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death, than the day of birth.” [RSV] We hear the first part quoted a lot, but with the second half, it seems to indicate that it is very tough to maintain one’s reputation over the course of life.

Finally, another form that was regularly used in wisdom, but also in the New Testament, is the rhetorical question. Rhetorical questions usually expect a “No” answer, though sometimes the question is worded so that the “No” is a double-negative and becomes a positive. Ecclesiastes uses the rhetorical question a lot, as demonstrated by the following list merely taken from Chapter 2.

What is the name of the book?

In Hebrew, it is called Qoholeth from the individual who identifies himself in the first verse. It comes from the Hebrew verb for “calling out” or “calling together.” So, it could mean “Preacher, Teacher, Counselor, Curator, etc.” Interestingly enough, though, Qoheleth is a proper noun with a feminine ending. Yet, the author of Ecclesiastes is clearly male as “son of David” and “king of Jerusalem.” So, why the female ending? Well, one reason might be because Proverbs describes Dame Wisdom as female. There is something nurturing and caring about wisdom. So, even though the professional sages were most likely all men (at least in the royal court), there was an identification of a nurturing, female component to the process of wisdom. Interestingly enough, Qoheleth is referred to directly seven (7) times in the book (1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, and 10) [Crenshaw, James L., *The Old Testament Library: Ecclesiastes* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1987), p. 32.]

**So, where do we get the name “Ecclesiastes.” It is built off both the Greek and Latin translations of the text. It comes from the same Greek verb as we get the New Testament word for “church” (“called-out assembly”). So, Ecclesiastes could mean, “Assemblyman or Preacher.”**

**For most people, the question is, “Is Qoheleth a nickname for Solomon?” The answer, of course, is that it could be. Solomon was a son of David and King of Jerusalem. He was even noted for his wisdom. Yet, he was not the only son of David—many Judean kings would have this designation, and there were many kings associated with Jerusalem. One would even expect all of them, like Hezekiah, to have familiarity with the teachings and preservation of wisdom.**

**Further, there is the question of dating the book. It is so filled with Aramaic endings and stylistic devices that it seems best to date the final form of the book after the Exile. Some scholars have argued that it was originally written in Aramaic and translated to Hebrew, but since we have a fragment of Ecclesiastes in Hebrew from one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (ca. 200 BC(E)), that seems highly unlikely. On the other hand, there are plenty of Persian words that show up in the text, leading one to believe that portions were written during or immediately after the Exile.**

**I believe Ecclesiastes has some traditional material that dates back even before the monarchy, some material that was collected during the era of kings (including Solomon), but that the book as a whole reflects the period after Israel returned to the Holy Land after the Exile. This makes good sense, especially since the Israelites would have been asking questions about why God was allowing the Persians (and later, the Greeks) to oppress them after God had delivered them. Regardless, we can be assured that the book was completed before 164 BC(E) and the Maccabean Revolt [Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 50.].**

**When we look at the structure of the book, we have to recognize that it is like a quilt with older material sewn together with new material into a whole. It is a book that intends to ask uncomfortable questions and challenge the humanistic/observational understanding of order. And, because the book makes people so uncomfortable, Ecclesiastes 12:9-13 reminds its Hebrew (and modern) readers of the requirement of looking through the lens of faith. It seems like it was added onto the remainder of the book to keep people from thinking Qoheleth is against God.**

**Princeton theologian and Chinese-American, Choon-Leong Seow points to some structural evidence as to why 12:9-13 is an epilogue that puts the rest of the book into perspective. He notes that the key word in Ecclesiastes is הבל, the Hebrew word which can be translated as breath, wisp, emptiness, or worthless. In the Hebrew numbering system, the first letter is worth five (5) points, the second is worth two (2) points, and the last is worth 30. So, if the word were a number, it would be 37. Interestingly enough, it is used 37 times in the book.**

**In addition, the book begins with “words of...” and if that phrase was a number, it would be 216. Again, interestingly, if we remove the part of Chapter 12 considered to be a summary or epilogue, the book has 216 verses. [Seow, Choon-Leong, *The Anchor Bible: Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1997), p. 44.**

**Some scholars use a simple outline for the book, as follows:**

1. **Qoheleth’s confession (1:12-2:26)**
2. **Sage doesn’t know God’s general design (3:1-13)  
   Sage doesn’t know what follows death (3:14-22)**
3. **Deceptions and Exhortations (4:1-8:15)**

**B’ Wisdom’s ineffectiveness (8:16-9:10)**

**A’ Deceptions and Exhortations (9:11-11:10)**

**[This is similar to that cited by Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 43.]**

**My favorite way to look at Ecclesiastes was published by Norbert Lohfink in 1980.**

* **Frame – Breath, Wisp, Nothing (1:1-2)**
* **Macrocosm—Nature Outlasts Humanity (1:3-11)**
* **Anthropology—Observations about Human Life (1:12-3:15)**
* **Social Critique I—Lack of Social Justice (3:16-4:17)**
* **Critique of Religion—Don’t Expect to Understand God’s Purpose (5:1-7)**
* **Social Critique II—Lack of Economic Fairness (5:8-6:9)**
* **Human Belief Systems—Observations about Human Understanding (6:10-9:6)**
* **Microcosm—Human Ethics Considered (9:7-12:7)**
* **Frame—Wisp of Wisps, Nothing of Nothing (12:8)**
* **(Epilogue—Fear and Obey God, Regardless (12:9-13))**

**[Lohfink, Norbert, *Kohelet: Die Neue Echter Bibel* (Würzburg: Echter, 1980), p. 10.]**

**The most important part of this way of looking at Ecclesiastes is that it shows the place of human understanding. No matter how much one has seen and experience and no matter how well one can reason from human understanding, one needs to hold one’s understanding in reserve because we cannot totally comprehend God’s purpose. There will always be mystery.**

**If we want to flourish in our lives, we should try to understand God’s creative order and learn how to respond within it to the maximum benefit. But, there will always be a gap in our understanding and we see that at both the center of the book and in the epilogue.**