

Old Testament #4: Wisdom Literature

WISDOM LITERATURE

1. Wisdom Literature is a group of biblical writings that deal with practical ethics and righteous living in a fallen world. It provides instructions for living while pondering the difficulties of life. Its goal is to supply the reader with appropriate information in order to make the right choices based on the fear of the Lord.
2. Wisdom Literature is found in various places throughout Scripture, but the term is mostly associated with Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon.

JOB – THE BOOK OF MYSTERY

BACKGROUND

1. The book of Job is an anonymous work set in the era of the patriarchs (1900 – 2100 BC). If Job or a contemporary was the author, then this was the first book of the Bible written down.
2. Job was a Gentile who lived without any knowledge of the Abrahamic Covenant.
3. Job is considered by many to be one of the most profound and elegant pieces of literature in the world.

“There is nothing written, I think, in the Bible or out of it, of equal literary merit.”¹ “...the greatest poem of ancient or modern times.”²

The Book of Job has a rich vocabulary with dozens of words found nowhere else in the Bible.

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Our Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, p. 56.

² Alfred Lord Tennyson, Quoted by Victor E. Reichert, *Job*, p. xiii.

The Book of Job has a very clear structure evident of a pattern consisting of “cycles of three.” It begins with a prologue and Job’s lament, and then proceeds to three cycles of dialogue between Job and his three friends. It concludes with three monologues and an epilogue.

THEMES

1. The main theme of Job is the sovereignty of God over every situation of life.

The sovereignty of God involves the use of secondary means to accomplish divine purposes. The evil inflicted on Job came from Satan, yet the Lord granted Satan permission to strike Job. God in his omnipotence can and does use secondary means to bring about his higher and perfect purposes.

2. A secondary theme of Job is suffering, although this topic of suffering is subordinate to the theme of the sovereignty of God.
 - Job’s sufferings are never explained to him; he is expected to trust God implicitly and submit to His dealings.
 - In the end, Job passed the test, renounced self-righteousness, and willingly submitted to the Lord.

Job 42:5, 6

“My ears had heard of You but now my eyes have seen You. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

- Job’s friends view of the suffering represents a rigid form of Retribution Theology: God blesses the righteous and judges the wicked. Although the Bible teaches that sin produces suffering, it does not teach that all suffering is the result of sin. This is the false syllogism of the three friends: Sin produces suffering. Job is suffering. Job must have sinned.

PSALMS – THE BOOK OF PRAISE

BACKGROUND

1. The Book of Psalms is a collection of poems put to music and written by several different authors. It appeals primarily to our emotions and

helps us express ourselves honestly to God.

Psalms is a compendium of God's revelation to his people and of their response in faith to him. It continually celebrates who God is and what he has done.

2. There are many different kinds of psalms including psalms of lament (42), thanksgiving and praise (138), wisdom and teaching (78), and psalms of imprecation (137).
3. One hundred and sixteen psalms have titles that include technical names designating the specific type of psalm, historical background information, and musical terms or instructions.
4. Eastern poetry is not based on rhyme, but on parallelism – the relationship of lines to one another.

Synonymous parallelism repeats the meaning of the first line in the second line, but with different words. “Deliver me from my enemies, O my God; defend me from those who rise up against me.” (Psalm 59:1)

Synthetic parallelism adds an additional thought to the first line in the second line, resulting in an expanded meaning. “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.” (Psalm 55:6)

Antithetic parallelism expresses a thought opposite to the first line in the second line, resulting in two contrasted thoughts. “For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” (Psalm 1:6)

PROVERBS – THE BOOK OF GODLY WISDOM

BACKGROUND

1. The book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings written by Solomon and other authors.

Solomon wrote the first section (1:1-22:16). An unknown author or group of authors wrote the second section (22:17-24:34). The men of King Hezekiah transcribed the third section from Solomon’s writings (25:1-29:27). An obscure author named Agur, the son of Jakeh, wrote the fourth section (30:1-33). The unknown King Lemuel

(possibly a pseudonym of Solomon) wrote the fifth section (31:1-9). An unknown (and unnamed) author wrote the sixth and final section (31:10-31).

2. A proverb is a brief expression of truth written in a form to aid the memory.

For example:

Proverbs 26:11

As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly.

THEMES

1. The purpose of Proverbs is stated in the opening verses:

Proverbs 1:2-4

To know wisdom and instruction, to discern the sayings of understanding, to receive instruction in wise behavior, righteousness, justice and equity; to give prudence to the naive, to the youth knowledge and discretion.

2. The common themes running throughout each section indicate an educational setting in the home or elsewhere.
3. Proverbs covers everything from wisdom, folly, sin, goodness, wealth, poverty, the tongue, pride, liberality, domestic faithfulness, honesty, falsehood, humility, justice, vengeance, paying bills, saving money, managing time, planning, goal setting, moderation, courtesy, strife, gluttony, relationships, work, child rearing, love, lust, laziness, friends, the family, life, and death.

ECCLESIASTES – THE BOOK OF WORLDLY WISDOM

1. The book of Ecclesiastes was possibly written by Solomon sometime near the end of his reign.
2. Ecclesiastes is a unique book in the Bible because it is written from the perspective of one who has fallen from a personal faith in God and is trying to explain life from the framework of observation and human reason.

“Ecclesiastes is not a word from God, but a word from one of history’s wisest men. His conclusions are eminently reasonable, but are frequently wrong! If we read this book as an accurate portrayal of the best reasoning of which man is capable, we will sense the emptiness in human beings.”³

Observation is reflected in the expression, “under the sun,” a phrase used 29 times in Ecclesiastes. Human reasoning is reflected in the expression, “I thought in my heart,” which is used 7 times throughout the book.

Peter Kreeft

“Unlike all the other books of the Bible, Ecclesiastes has no faith flashbulb attached to its camera to reveal the hidden meanings of life. It uses only the available light “under the sun” – sense observation and human reason. Ecclesiastes is the truest picture of the surface that has ever been written.”⁴

The words of Solomon begin with this expression: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2) and end with the same expression: “Everything is meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 12:8) There is no answer to the meaning of life and no resolution to his questions.

“In this book, God reveals to us exactly what life is when God does not reveal to us what life is.”⁵

A scribe or commentator added the addendum to Solomon’s words later. “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.” (Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14)

THEME

1. The primary theme of Ecclesiastes is explicit throughout the entire work: life is meaningless without a relationship with God.

“What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the

³ Lawrence O. Richards, The Bible Reader’s Companion.

⁴ Peter Kreeft, Three Philosophies of Life, p.19.

⁵ *ibid.* p.23.

sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. All things are wearisome. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:3-9)

SONG OF SOLOMON – THE BOOK OF PHYSICAL LOVE

BACKGROUND

Authorship is attributed to Solomon in the text (1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11-12), in rabbinical tradition, and in everything that is known about Solomon and his career. He probably wrote it near the beginning of his reign.

1. The Song of Solomon is a unique work of dramatic poetry which is never quoted in the Old or New Testament and never mentions the name of God.
2. There are three traditional interpretations of the Song of Solomon.
 - Allegory - the characters and events of the story are not historical but invented to convey a deeper and hidden spiritual meaning.

The problem with this view is two-fold: there is no indication in the text that it is an allegory; and, allegory tends to be so subjective it can mean anything the interpreter wants.
 - Extended Type - the characters and events of the story are historical but represent a picture of God’s relationship to Israel or Christ’s relationship to the church.
 - Literal - the characters and events of the story record an actual romance between Solomon and a Shulamite woman.
3. The safest interpretation of Song of Solomon is the literal one that sees the book as a divine sanction and celebration of the physical union in the marital context. It becomes a protection against the two extremes of asceticism and lust.

PURPOSE

1. The purpose of this book is to vindicate and extol marriage and the physical union as something good in itself and not simply a means to an end (i.e. procreation).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the book of Job help you deal with the recurrent question of why does God allow the suffering of the innocent?
2. What is your favorite psalm? Can you identify which kind of psalm it is? How has it affected your life and relationship with God?
3. Why did God include Song of Solomon in the Bible? How does this book strengthen our relationship with God?

HOMEWORK

Select one of the following:

1. Find three verses from Proverbs on each of the following themes: wealth, the tongue, strife, and laziness.
2. Read one of the following psalms each day: Psalm 96, 105, 42, 138 and 37. After the fifth day, talk to your "buddy" about the way the reading of those Psalms impressed you.