

READ SCRIPTURE WORKSHOP

HOW TO READ WISDOM LITERATURE

DEFINITION

“The skill in the art of godly living.”

Or more fully, wisdom is “that orientation which allows one to live in harmonious accord with God’s ordering of the world.” So, the Bible’s wisdom literature is meant to help us become skillful in the art of godly living.

Distinctive Marks of Wisdom Literature

- A keen interest in the way the world works, our place in the world, and how things operate under God’s sovereign care.
- Most Wisdom Literature is poetry, but not all poetic material is Wisdom Literature. One of the most important things to note about poetry is that poets think in images.
- Wisdom literature often uses hyperbolic language to convey a thought or point more forcefully.

UNIFYING THEMES

You’ll notice these themes in every book of Wisdom Literature:

- The fear of the Lord
- The limits of human wisdom
- The righteous and the wicked in relation to God
- Grappling with suffering
- The nature of true piety

FUNCTIONS OF WISDOM LITERATURE

1. Wisdom literature helps God’s people navigate the pitfalls of life in a fallen world.
2. The Bible’s Wisdom Literature prepares us to give an answer to the world’s folly by giving us God’s wisdom for life.

Some scholars have noted the similarities between the Bible’s wisdom literature and some of the writings of the surrounding pagan nations of the Ancient Near East (ANE). For example, the ancient Egyptian work, The Instruction of Amenemope from the 13th century B.C. has marked similarities to Proverbs 22-24. There are cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia that wrestle with the problem of a “righteous sufferer” like Job. Psalm 104 seems to share a lot in common with an ancient Egyptian hymnody. And many scholars have seen connections with Aramaic wisdom literature and even later Greek writings. This has led many critical scholars to be skeptical of the Bible’s wisdom literature and think that the Biblical authors just copied their surrounding cultures.

However, far from this sort of critical position, the truth of the matter is that the Biblical authors demonstrate that they inhabited and challenged their contemporary cultural milieu. The questions that ancient Israelites had to wrestle with were not unlike the questions that the Egyptians, Babylonians or Syrians were asking as well. They participated in the wider culture of their day and brought the Bible’s worldview to bear on that culture. Many scholars have noted that the Bible’s wisdom literature is unrivalled in its scope, originality and profundity by the ANE writings.

The Biblical authors were doing what we should continue to do today - the task of cultural apologetics - giving a reason for the hope in us to the culture around us.

REVIEW: Method of Interpretation

1. **OBSERVATION** - Context is King
2. **INTERPRETATION** - Move from Big to Small
3. **APPLICATION** - Don’t be Unmoved by God’s Word



We must always move from Observation to Interpretation and then to Application. The better your observations, the better your interpretation, and the better your application.



PROVERBS | Wisdom for Living Well

WHAT ARE PROVERBS?

Proverbs are parables, riddles or short pithy ('full of meaning') sayings that are not designed to spoon-feed the reader but rather to prick him/her into deeper thought and consideration by use of word pictures, analogies or sharp brevity. Their refusal to explain themselves and use of similes and metaphors call for prolonged reflection to unpack them.

Forms of Proverbs

- **Descriptive Proverbs** - general observations about life (e.g. Prov. 10:1)
- **Comparative Proverbs** - popularly stated as "X is better than Y" (e.g. Prov. 15:16)
- **Prescriptive Proverbs** - the right response to a situation or direct instruction (e.g. Prov. 20:22)
- **Warning Proverbs** - alert us to dangers (e.g. Prov. 24:33-34)
- **Insight Proverbs** - help us "see" something more clearly. For example, about the lingering influence of gossip on us in Proverbs 26:22.

Key Themes

- The Sovereignty of God (e.g. Prov. 16:33)
- Creation's Order
 - Common Grace (e.g. Prov. 20:12)
 - General Principles (e.g. Prov. 24:3-4)
- The Experience of Life (e.g. Prov. 13:21)

An Outline of Proverbs

- **Chapters 1-9 | A Fatherly Approach:** exhortations for the young and poetic metaphor to encourage following Lady Wisdom instead of Lady Folly
- **Chapters 10 - 22:16 | A Plain Man's Approach:** Solomon's collection of sentence-sayings. Life's regularities, oddities, dangers, and delights, noted, compared and evaluated
- **Chapters 22:17 - 24:34 | More Fatherly Teachings:** two groups of wise men's exhortations
- **Chapters 25-29 | More Sentence-Sayings:** gleanings from Solomon compiled by Hezekiah's men
- **Chapter 30 | An Observer's Approach:** musings on the hidden Creator and on the idiosyncrasies of His creatures
- **Chapter 31 | A Motherly Approach:** a mother's home-truths and a wife's example

The book of Proverbs opens with a father's advice to his son to follow Lady Wisdom and closes with the advice of a mother to her son about a Lady of Wisdom.

THE KEYS TO PROVERBS | Chapters 1 - 9

To know **wisdom** and **instruction**, to understand words of insight... (Proverbs 1:2)

- **WISDOM** - The word 'wisdom' is the ability to understand the way God designed life to work and skillfully respond with the appropriate action.
- **INSTRUCTION** - also translated as "discipline" because it refers to a chastening lesson that corrects moral faults

The **fear of the Lord** is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. Proverbs 1:7)

- Note that verse 2 says that fools (the opposite of the wise) are those who despise wisdom and instruction or discipline.
- The fear of the Lord is the key to Proverbs and wisdom in the Bible.

FOLLOWING WISDOM IS FOLLOWING GOD

- Wisdom is presented in ways that parallel what is said about God in other parts of the OT. (Compare Prov. 1:23 with Isa. 44:3; also Joel 2:28).
- Wisdom stretches out her hand to those who will not listen, just as God does in Isaiah 65:2.
- Wisdom laughs at the calamity of the fool who rejects her just as God laughs at those who seek to throw off his authority (Psa. 2:4).
- If fools continue to reject Wisdom, there will come a time when they will seek her but not be able to find her (Prov. 1:28 compare with Hos. 5:6-7).

INTERPRETIVE TOOLS

1. **Literary Context** - look at the whole teaching on the topic in Proverbs. Commentaries helpful for original language insights.
2. **Principles NOT Promises** - principles to live by that will, generally speaking, lead to a life that is blessed by God. They focus on the general rule not the exceptions.
3. **Situational Application** - Proverbs instruct us towards wisdom and also encourages us to use wisdom in applying them to our lives depending on what is appropriate to the situation.

One of the best ways to approach the sections in Proverbs that are sentence sayings is to start collecting them together and arranging them by the topic they address to build a more full picture of the wisdom on it.



JOB | Wisdom for Struggling with Suffering

If Proverbs sought to give us wisdom for living wisely in the world so that we would enjoy a life blessed by God, Job serves as the counterbalance to our impulse to interpret the Proverbs as absolute promises. Job tells the story of a righteous and blameless man who very much embodies the way of wisdom and righteousness in Proverbs. However, despite his piety, calamity befalls Job's life. The rest of the book's story wrestles with making sense of it all.

The Genre of Job

- The prologue and epilogue are written as prose, whereas the whole rest of the book of Job is actually poetry.
- "Job is best understood as a debate about how to respond to suffering that leads to the question concerning where wisdom is to be found."
- "Job wrestles with the disorder of suffering and its relationship to piety. The friends of Job operate with a mechanical view of divine retribution so that if Job is suffering he must have sinned. This is a distortion of the view of Proverbs but it causes Job to wrestle with God's justice and how he should respond to suffering even though he is innocent. The mystery and sovereignty of God is emphasize..."
(Dr. Richard Belcher Jr)

An Outline of Job

- Chapters 1-2 | Prologue
- Chapter 3 | Job's lament
- Chapters 4-27 | The cycle of speeches - Job's friends and his protests
- Chapter 28 | Wisdom poem
- Chapters 29-31 | Job's last defence
- Chapters 32-37 | Elihu's monologue
- Chapters 38-42:6 | God's speeches and Job's responses
- Chapters 42:7-17 | Epilogue

KEYS TO INTERPRETING JOB

The Prologue | The Heavenly Courtroom

- Nowhere do we read that Job or his friends are told of this Divine Council that sets up the situation. So this is information that is meant to guide us as readers on how we interpret what comes next in the narrative.
- Key Question: Does God's finest servant, Job, serve God for conscience or convenience?
- God allows this and in each of the afflictions that the Accuser brings on Job, Job responds in integrity and does not curse God. Job is on trial and so far has been vindicated in his integrity.

JOB'S MISERABLE COMFORTERS | Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar

- They start off well
- They represent the collective wisdom of the ANE
- Their view of God's justice is ultimately mechanical and simplistic
- Not all they say is wrong (e.g. Job 5:13 & 1 Cor. 3:19)
- They believe in the One True God
- It is their belief in this God that causes them to struggle with Job's suffering - it challenges their preconceived notions of God.

Challenging a Small View of God: The book shows how small a fragment of any situation we actually perceive and how much we can ignore or distort through our presuppositions.

THE CONFLICT | Who is wise?

- Each time cycle, the friends' speeches get shorter and shorter reflecting the fact that they are running out of arguments.
- In this contest between Job and his friends, the question that dominates the whole book: Who is really wise in all of this?
- Job anticipates the answer to this question in the poem on divine wisdom in chapter 28 where he ascribes all wisdom to God.
- After Elihu's monologue, it is clear that human wisdom has run out. It is time for God to take the stage.

GOD'S RESPONSE | A Whirlwind of Truth

- Job had hoped for a divine interview to learn why he was suffering.
- God doesn't seem to directly answer that question. Instead, He rebukes Job for casting doubt on His Divine reputation. (See Job 40:8 & 38:2-3)
- Our perspective is just limited to our short lives and incomplete perspective of things and thus unable to make a proper judgment on God's operation of the world and all of history. It is improper of us to try to judge the Judge of all the Universe on how He runs the cosmos.
- Job's response is to repent of his quickness to presume to know better than God.
- The story ends with God vindicating Job in front of his friends and restoring double to Job all that he had lost.

The point of the book is not necessarily to exhaustively explain all of the suffering or the reasons why God might allow every instance of suffering, but rather to move us to trust God.



ECCLESIASTES | Wisdom in the Balance

If Proverbs deals with how to live wisely in God's world, and Job deals with the fact that even if we do live wisely it doesn't guarantee a pain-free life, then Ecclesiastes serves as another balance to a well-rounded biblical view of wisdom. The unpredictability of time, death and chance make life hard to understand and master fully. Instead, enjoy it all as a gift from God for God will bring everything into judgment.



There are two distinct voices: the narrator who frames the story in the opening and closing sections of the book, and a character named "Qohelet" in Hebrew (which means one who calls an assembly - often translated "the Preacher").

<-- Scan the QR Codes with your mobile device to watch short video summaries from Bible Project on Ecclesiastes.

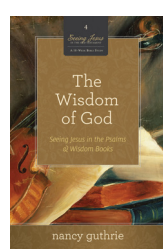
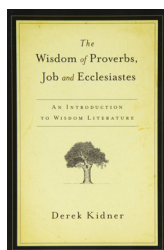
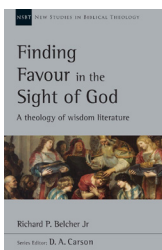
JESUS CHRIST - WISDOM EMBODIED

There are also connections between the character of Wisdom and Christ:

- Both Wisdom and Christ are presented as instruments of creation (Prov. 3:19, 'by wisdom'; John 1:3, 'through him'; and Col. 1:16, 'by him' and 'through him'). When Paul says that "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Col. 1:15), he is using the language of Proverbs 8.
- Both Wisdom and Christ are street preachers proclaiming their message in public places, calling people to follow them, and warning of the dangers if people reject their message.
- Both Wisdom and Christ are like banquet hostesses sending forth messengers, inviting people to a banquet of substantial food, experiencing opposition from sinners and promising life to those who come to the banquet.
- Both Wisdom and Christ existed with God before all things, descended from heaven, offered blessings in the symbols of food and drink, sent out invitations for people to join them and were rejected by the masses. But Christ is greater than Wisdom because he is specifically identified as the Son (John 1:18), equal with God his Father (John 10:30), the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), the one who will reconcile all things to himself (Col. 1:20).

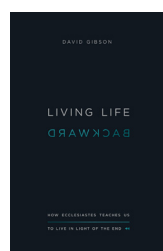
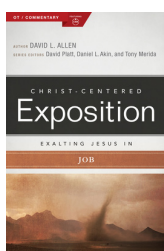
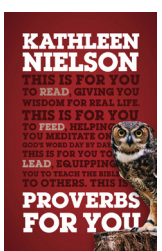
In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3). Jesus Christ embodies the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:30). When he was on earth, his predominant form of teaching was a form of wisdom called the parable, which in Hebrew is "masal" also translated as "proverb".

The Wisdom who beckons us is none other than Jesus Christ. Will you hear his voice?



RECOMMENDED DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARIES

- [Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End](#) by David Gibson
- [Exalting Jesus in Job \(in Christ-Centered Exposition Series\)](#) by David L. Allen
- [Proverbs for You \(The GoodBook Company\)](#) by Kathleen Nielson



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES ON WISDOM LITERATURE

- [Finding Favour in the Sight of God: A Theology of Wisdom Literature \(New Studies in Biblical Theology Book 46\)](#) by Richard P. Belcher Jr
- [The Wisdom Of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to Wisdom Literature](#) by Derek Kidner
- [The Wisdom of God: Seeing Jesus in the Psalms and Wisdom Books](#) by Nancy Guthrie