

Interpreting the Biblical Wisdom Literature

What is Wisdom?

Wisdom can probably be best defined as “the ability to make godly choices in life.”(1) The study and collection of wise sayings that would help people make good decisions was a preoccupation in the ancient world. Kings of many nations employed men to collect and record wise sayings. The wisdom literature contained in the Bible differs from that produced by other nations because it recognises that a relationship with the Living God is the starting point in the search for wisdom (Psalm 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 2:1-4; 9:10; Job 28:28; Eccl. 12:13). The ‘wisdom’ books of the Bible are Job, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and the Song of Solomon. Wisdom sayings are also found in the Psalms and in both narrative and prophecy (1 Sam. 24:13; 1 Kings 20:11; Jer. 31:29; Ezek. 18:2). In the New Testament wisdom sayings can be found in Romans 12; 1 Cor. 13; Gal. 5:19-23; Eph. 5:22-6:9; Col. 3:5-17; Hebrews 3:12-19; 4:11-13; 6:1-12; James 1-3; 1 Peter 2:11-17. The aim of wisdom sayings is intensely practical - it is to supply you with the information you need to make the right choices. Because of this practical orientation of these sayings and our unfamiliarity with this style of writing we often misunderstand and misapply them. For this reason we will look at each of the four wisdom books of the Old Testament in turn and attempt to set out a few principles that will help in their interpretation.

Proverbs

A proverb is a highly concentrated statement of truth. The book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings compiled over a long period of time and from a variety of sources, including Solomon (1:1; 10:1; 25:1) and Agur, son of Jakeh (30:1). These sayings are expressed in Hebrew poetry in a variety of forms. The writers make use of the same parallelisms as are found in the Psalms, e.g. *synonymous parallelism* (17:4; 16:13, 18; 21:14), *step parallelism* (11:22; 12:14; 15:23-24) and *antithetical parallelism* (10:1; 11:21; 12:2; 17:9).(2) Proverbs 31:10-31 is written in the form of an acrostic - each stanza beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (21 in all). Another common device is the so-called x/x+1 device (e.g. 6:6-19; 30:15-16, 18-19, 21-23). This involves the use of the formula: “There are (x) things that... (x+1) things that...” e.g. “There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him” (Prov. 6:16). The same formula is found outside Proverbs, e.g. Hosea 6:2. Such devices served as an aid to memorisation.

Fee & Stuart offer the following caution when it comes to interpreting the Proverbs:

A proverb is a brief particular expression of a truth. The briefer the statement is, the less likely it is to be totally precise and universally applicable. We know that long, highly qualified, elaborate statements of fact are not only difficult to understand, but virtually impossible for most people to memorise. So the proverbs are phrased in a catchy way, so as to be learnable by anyone.(3)

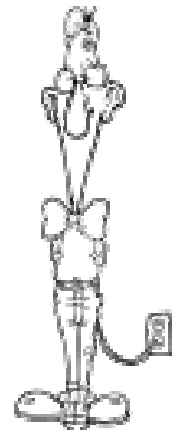
Hyperbole is a common element in Proverbs, which explains why so many are misinterpreted. **Hyperbole** is a deliberate exaggeration made in order to make a point. Unless this is recognised all sorts of strange readings are possible. For example: Does the Lord deport unbelievers (10:30)? Are the wicked incapable of any good deed (12:10)? Do wise men go around attacking cities (21:22)? Will looking at the Crown Jewels make them vanish (23:5)? In all of these examples the answer is “no” because hyperbole is being used, e.g. the righteous enjoy a security that the Lord alone provides; the wicked man is characterised by cruelty; to be wise is better than to have military strength, and the pursuit of happiness through wealth is like chasing a shadow.

*“Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone,
for they will surely sprout wings
and fly off to the sky like an eagle.”
Proverbs 23:5*



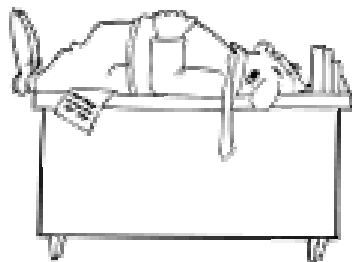
Although there is an important theological element in Proverbs (e.g. “The fear of the Lord...” 1:7; 3:7; 16:6, 22; 24:21-22; 28:14) their emphasis is very much on practical matters such as how to live successfully and have a rewarding life. **Proverbs are not legally binding promises from God.** He will not always demolish your neighbour's house because he or she won't go to church with you (14:11), He won't underwrite whatever foolish thing you decide to do (16:3), nor (sadly) are Christian parents guaranteed that their children will become believers (22:6; cf. John 1:12-13).

The characters described in Proverbs are often misunderstood. A ‘fool’ is not a dimwit but an unbelieving pagan (12:15-16; Psalm 14:1). His life is sure to end in ruin because he has rejected the source of true wisdom - the Lord himself. The ‘simple’ (Prov. 1:4) can be best defined as “...those who are easily persuaded and who ‘lack judgement’ (9:4, 16), who are immature, inexperienced and naive (cf. Ps. 19:7).”(4) The ‘ sluggard’ is an unproductive, lazy, good-for-nothing. Such a person will never succeed at anything he does because he never does anything (Prov. 6:6-10; 10:26; 12:11; 14:23; 15:19; 20:13; 24:30-34). Two of the major themes of the book - *Wisdom* and *Folly* - are often personified as an elegant hostess (1:20-21; 3:13-20; 8:1-9:6; 28:26) and a shabby adulteress (5:1-14; 6:20-7:27; 9:13-18)(5) respectively.



*“The fool says in his heart,
‘There is no God...’”
Psalm 14:1*

*“How long will you lie there you sluggard?
When will you get up from your sleep?”
Proverbs 6:9*



Many Christians, particularly those ensnared by the “health & wealth gospel,” major on the positive things that Proverbs says about worldly riches (3:3-10; 10:4, 22; 13:21-22; 14:20; 19:4; 21:21). However, **Proverbs must be read as a whole and no individual statement taken as the whole truth on any subject.** When studying the book it is very helpful to collate the various themes. When this is done with the subject of riches a more balanced picture is given (10:15:11:4; 11:18; 17:5; 23:4-5). Likewise Proverbs 18:8 might well sound like it is saying that gossip is a good thing, until one looks at the rest of

Proverbs (10:11, 18; 11:18; 17:4; 18:6-7). Bribery is said to have its benefits (17:8; 21:14), but the rest of Scripture is very negative towards it (Deut. 16:19; 1 Sam. 8:3; 12:3; Prov. 15:27; 17:23; 28:21; 29:4; Eccl. 7:7; Isa. 1:23; 33:15).

Proverbs have to be fully contextualised in order to be fully understood, (6) e.g. 22:11 can hardly be applied directly today when royalty occupies a far different role to that which it held in ancient Israel. A modern application might be that the Lord grants the righteous favour with those in positions of authority. Likewise 25:24 is not saying that it is better to live in a precarious position on top of a house. Unlike the people in Old Testament times we do not live in houses with flat roofs, which often had a room in which people could sleep (e.g. 2 Kings 4:10). Today we would say that it is better to live in the attic or the garage than with a quarrelsome wife (that you should never have married).



The Book of Job

The basic principle for interpreting Job can be summarised concisely in three words: context, context and context. Those who read the book a chapter a day or pick out ‘proof texts’ at random are likely to be misled by its teaching. Only by reading it right through (preferably in one sitting) can one grasp what it is trying to say.

The book of Job can probably be best described as a vindication of God’s justice in the light of human suffering. There are nine characters in the story: the narrator; the Lord; Satan; Job; Job’s wife; Eliphaz; Zophar; Bildad and Elihu. Of these nine only the words of the narrator and those of the Lord Himself are absolutely true. The words of Satan are shown to be false as the story develops: Job was not devoted to God because of the benefits that brought him; his relationship was far deeper than that (16:19-21; 19:23-27). The words of Job’s wife (2:9) are immediately rejected by Job as foolish (2:10).

The Nine Characters in the Book of Job

Character	References
Narrator	1:1-6, 12b-20; 2:1, 7-8, 10b-3:1; 31:1-5
The Lord	1:7a, 8, 12a; 2:2a, 3, 6; 38:1-40:2, 6-34
Satan	17:7b, 9-11; 2:2b, 4-5

Job	1:21-22; 2:10a; 3:2-26; 6:1-10:22; 12:1-14:22; 16:1-17:16; 19:1-29; 21:1-34; 23:1-24:25; 26:1-31:40; 40:4-5; 42:1-6
Job's wife	2:9
Eliphaz	4:1-5:27; 15:1-35; 22:1-30
Zophar	11:1-20; 20:1-29
Bildad	18:1-21; 25:1-5
Elihu	32:6-37:24

Job's three friends present what the original readers of Job would have understood as the orthodox position on suffering: no man is sinless and the Lord hands out his punishment according to the degree of sin committed.(7) As Job was suffering they concluded that the reason for this was that he had sinned. The words of Eliphaz epitomise this supposed cause and effect relationship between sin and suffering. He maintains that the innocent never suffer (4:7), whereas the wicked reap what they sow (4:8-9) and experience a life of torment (15:20-35). All Job has to do is to repent of his secret sin and God will restore his prosperity (22:21-30). Job replies that this is clearly not the case - the wicked do not get what they deserve in this life (21:1-34; 24:1-17) and he continually maintains his own innocence (31:1-40). The frustration of Job and his friends grows as the story develops as neither party can persuade the other side that he/they are in the wrong.

Elihu, who is a younger man (32:6-7), speaks last. He comes nearest to providing Job with an answer by pointing beyond his situation to the awesomeness of God. Job and his friends were too limited in their viewpoints, thinking that they were capable in fathoming God's purposes. The Lord does not leave Job with this "partly satisfying, partly infuriating answer"(8) and speaks to Job directly out of a storm (38:1). He chides Job for his limited perspective, but vindicates him against the accusations of his friends (42:7-9). Finally Job is restored and God blesses him more abundantly than before (42:10-16).

The message of the book might be summed up by Isaiah 55:8-9: God's ways are higher than ours. True wisdom is to be found only in a relationship with the Lord, and not in seemingly logical arguments lacking a heavenly perspective.(9) The message of the book of Job is extremely relevant today as it ever was. God's character has not changed(10) and neither has man finite knowledge.(11)

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is source of mystery to most Christians. Many wonder what it is doing in the Bible at all, since it seems to be so negative in its outlook on life. Others consider its meaning

to be “too deep” for them and for all practical purposes they ignore the book. Such reactions are understandable, because Ecclesiastes presents us with a consistent message: everything in this life (wisdom, pleasure, hard work, advancement, riches and obedience) is meaningless because in the end whatever we have done we will all die (9:2-10). There are some verses that offer practical advice on wise living in a similar vein to Proverbs. These include advice on the use of the tongue (5:2-3; 10:12), making vows (5:4-6), bribery (7:7), anger (7:9), wisdom (7:11-12, 19) and how to act when before the king (8:2-6). Ecclesiastes establishes a deliberate contrast with the rest of Scripture because the writer’s intention was to demonstrate that a life lived out as if God does not exist or is not involved in human existence is meaningless and pointless. The last two verses carry the punch-line to the whole book - fear God and obey him; He will bring all our deeds to judgement. These verses point the reader to the rest of Scripture (particularly the Pentateuch where the commandments [12:13] are to be found).(12)

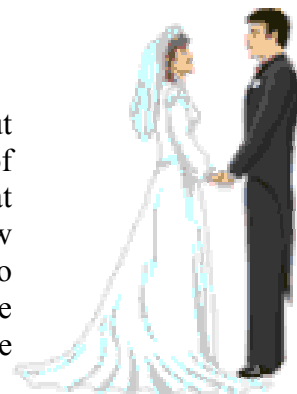
Song of Songs

The Song of Songs has been a problem for Christians over the years. Not because its meaning is obscure, but rather because it is all too clear! The Song is a poem about the love that a man has for a woman and vice versa. Its intention was to teach Hebrew men and women about true romantic love that they should seek, find and continue to experience within the lifelong relationship of marriage. Sadly by the turn of the fourth century AD the church fathers had begun to relegate marriage a poor second place to celibacy. They spiritualised the Song and argued that it spoke of the love relationship between God and Israel, or more usually between Christ and the Church.(13) This interpretation became popular and is still widely held even today. It is difficult to understand the exegetical gymnastics that are required to read such a meaning into Song 5:2-6!(14)

Fee & Stuart provide a very helpful summary of the contents of the Song:

There are many other kinds of expressions of love and fondness in the Song in addition to visual comparisons and dream sequences. There are also such components as statements of the ardor of love (e.g. 1:2-4), advice and challenge from observers of the romance (e.g., 1:8; 5:9), romantic invitations from the man to the woman and vice versa (e.g., 7:11-13; 8:13), purposely exaggerated boasts about the greatness of the woman by the man and vice versa (e.g., 2:8-9), the need to resist temptation to be unfaithfully attracted to anyone else (e.g., 6:8-9), and declaration that a lover’s attraction can be stronger even than the splendor of so great a king as Solomon himself (e.g., 3:6-11 following on 2:16-3:5; cf. 8:11-12). All these are cast in the form of musical poetry, but they are nevertheless all related logically and rationally to life’s choices about love, romance and sex.(15)

In a world that speaks a great deal about ‘love’ and little about the commitment that marriage requires, this book reminds us of God’s original purpose for man and woman (Gen. 2:21-24) that they be united in a stable, lifelong, loving relationship. The New Testament presents marriage as a picture of Jesus’ relationship to the church (Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 22:17). In a sense it is impossible for someone who has never experienced marriage to grasp the



full depth of such an illustration.(16)

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References

(1) Fee Gordon D. & Stuart, Douglas *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 206.

(2) For a full definition of these terms see “Interpreting the Psalms” (Not Yet Published to the Internet).

(3) Fee & Stuart, 217-218. Derek Kidner, *Wisdom to Live By: An Introduction to the Old Testament’s Wisdom Books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*. (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 26: “Naturally they generalise, as a proverb must, and may therefore be charged with making life too tidy to be true. But nobody objects to this in secular sayings, for the very form demands a sweeping statement and looks for a hearer with his wits about him. We need no telling that a maxim like ‘Many hands make light work’ is not the last word on the subject, since ‘Too many cooks spoil the broth’ .Just so, Proverbs is not afraid to put two clashing counsels side by side in 26:4-5...”

(4) *NIV Study Bible*, 946.

(5) Kidner, 20: “She is called at one point an evil woman (6:24), but most often a stranger or outsider... yet her foreignness does not have to be literal. The point is that she has put herself outside the loyalties and structures of society and the laws of God, and owed her disruptiveness and much of her fascination to that intriguing fact.”

(6) Fee & Stuart, 224-225.

(7) Kidner, 60: “It is possible to dismiss these friends of Job too lightly, for the book does not present them as hypocrites arriving to gloat (see 2:11-13), nor as heretics offering manifestly false doctrines, nor again as fools producing no serious arguments. The New Testament can treat certain words of Eliphaz as Scripture [cf. Job 5:13 with 1 Cor. 3:19, and cf. Job 5:17 with Heb. 12:5]; and every speaker believes firmly in the one God, who is not only all-powerful but wholly just, and at the same time quick to restore the penitent and to heap blessings on the teachable.”

(8) Fee & Stuart, 216.

(9) H.H. Rowley, “The Book of Job and Its Meaning,” in *From Moses to Qumran* (Lutterworth, 1963), 178: “We may pause to note that the cause of Job’s suffering was more than the Satan’s insinuation against him. He was suffering to vindicate more than himself. He was vindicating God’s trust in him. He was not so much abandoned by God as supremely honoured by God.” Cited by Kidner, 58.

(10) Kidner, 59:

“It would be a mistake to see the concession to the accuser as a merely isolated tactic. It reflects the consistent practice of God. Where we might wish to argue that omnipotence ought to have stamped out evil at its first appearance, God’s chosen way was not to crush it out of hand but to wrestle with it; and to do so in weakness rather than through miracles, and through costly permissions rather than through flat refusals. Putting the matter in our terms we might say that he is resolved to overcome it in fait combat, not by veto but by hard-won victory....

...we have... a New Testament echo of the prologue, which confirms the doctrine of divine permission, but does so in the illuminating context of the Passion...” - Luke 22:31-32.

(11) Kidner, 62: “On the specific issue of suffering, the basic mistake of these comforters is still with us wherever Christians make projections from their axioms about God, or from their doctrine of redemption, to the effect that the perfect health of the redeemed, here and now, must be what God intends. Like Job’s comforters,

those who argue in this way are deciding for themselves what God must surely think and do. Further, but unlike their predecessors, they are gripped by the 'now' of God's promises, to the exclusion of the 'not yet'. Had they ministered to Job, they would have seen his plight not necessarily as a punishment or (with Elihu) an education, but rather as a consequence of drifting somewhat from the Lord and from the full enjoyment of saving health. It would be a situation to be remedied by faith. Yet Job's sufferings were in fact brought on him not by any lapse of faith but by his very blamelessness; and their long duration was serving heaven's own secret purposes, including the completion of the test and the exhausting of the human arguments. This is not to say that his case should be seen as they key to all others, or even to any others: simply that it lifts one corner of a curtain beyond which, at any time, there will lie factors of which we have no inkling."

(12) Fee & Stuart, 212-215.

(13) Dennis F. Kinlaw, "Song of Songs," F.E. Gaebelin, gen. ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 5. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 1205-1207.

(14) Kinlaw, 1203: "There are problems. however, in accepting the Song of Songs as an allegory.

First, nothing in the text indicates that the intention of the author was to allegorize. There is an ingenuousness in style and content that belies the artfulness essential to good allegory. The text includes no clues that the author had any allegorical intent. The result is that the meanings in the text, if taken to allegory, are left to the imagination of every interpreter.

Second, the people, places, and experiences recorded seem to be real, not literary devices. The uses of names like, Solomon, Jerusalem, Lebanon, En Gedi, Tirezah, and others do not have the ring of metaphor about them. There is little here akin to a work like *Pilgrim's Progress*.

A third reality is that this little book does not have the narrative character - viz., the clear progressive story-line - that we usually expect in allegory.

The result of the use of the allegorical approach is that the Song of Songs has become to an unusual degree a field for fertile imaginations. There have been few or no hermeneutical controls. The boundaries of interpretation have tended to be as wide as the creative fancies of the scholars.

(15) Fee & Stuart, 229.

(16) Fee & Stuart, 226-230.

