

Worksheet #1
Saurav Rawal
Interpreting the Old Testament 2: OTEN 5352
Dr. Derrick A. Wilson

Question 1- From the reading in Fee/Stuart and Hess, discuss what wisdom literature is and what it is not. Also, include in your discussion any similarity/disparity between Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) wisdom and Hebrew wisdom.

What is wisdom literature?

Wisdom literature constitutes a section in the Old Testament dedicated to imparting teachings and preaching wisdom across various aspects of life. This genre comprises four books: The Book of Job, The Book of Proverbs, The Book of Ecclesiastes, and The Song of Solomon. Wisdom literature aims to caution God's people against straying into the path of wickedness and encourages the pursuit of righteousness in the fear of YHWH.

According to the Got Questions ministry, "Wisdom literature deals with how to live well. Those who seek harmonious relationships with friends, family, and God, wish to avoid foolish mistakes in everyday life, or desire to raise their children in the fear of the Lord turn to the wisdom literature of the Bible for advice."¹

Hebrew Wisdom literature teaches us wisdom that is not of this world but is inspired by the transcendent God of heaven. Fee and Stewart define wisdom as 'the ability to make godly choices in life'². These godly choices are crucial in shielding individuals from calamities. While calamities are not exclusively the fate of the wicked, those who make wise choices have a reduced probability of suffering.

Additionally, wisdom literature comprises concise proverbial forms addressing both significant and mundane subjects³. These writings admonish the consequences of rejecting the wisdom that cries out in the streets. Hebrew Wisdom literature challenges a simplistic view of life, as seen in Job, and underscores wisdom in trusting and finding meaning in God alone, as illustrated in Ecclesiastes. It also imparts wisdom in the realm of relationships, exemplified by the depiction of marriage in the Song of Solomon. Ultimately, wisdom literature encourages the fear of the Lord and the pursuit of a life that is pleasing to Him.

What is not wisdom literature?

The wisdom literature contains advice, warnings, promises, comfort, and directions. However, it does not guarantee success, so it is not a legal guarantee from God. We are to choose God's way and live in allegiance to God, but doing all this does not guarantee prosperity; the Book of Job is the perfect example.

According to Fee & Stewart, "Wisdom does not cover all of life. Intensely practical, it tends not to touch on the theological or historical issues so important elsewhere in the Bible. And skill at wisdom does not guarantee that it will be properly used" (Fee and Stewart, p. 239).

¹ Got Questions - *GotQuestions.org*. Last modified April 16, 2018. Accessed February 18, 2024. <https://www.gotquestions.org/wisdom-literature.html>.

² Fee, Gordon D, and Douglas Stuart. "Wisdom: Then and Now." chapter. In *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 233. 4th ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014.

³ Hess, Richard S. "Poetic Books." chapter. In *The Old Testament - a Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction*, 389. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2016.

Wisdom literature is not a narrative. As Hess comments, “Hebrew literature, rather than constituting a narrative, consists of brief proverbial forms that address large and small subjects”.⁴

Wisdom literature highlights that prosperity is not an expeditious, guaranteed outcome. It promotes a life marked by integrity, honesty, and uprightness. However, adhering to these principles does not ensure perpetual prosperity or immunity from suffering. It is crucial to approach these teachings with contemplation, avoiding misinterpretation and abuse to preserve their intended wisdom and guidance.

Similarities between ANE Wisdom and Hebrew Wisdom

There are several similarities between Hebrew Wisdom and ANE Wisdom. One of the similarities is evident in how Wisdom Literature from the West Semitic city of Ugarit contrasts the righteous and the wicked, mirroring the themes found in Hebrew Wisdom (Hess, 466)⁵. Additional similarities are observed in both ANE Wisdom and Hebrew Wisdom, as they emphasize the development of virtues. For instance, the Instructions of Amenemope and Proverbs 22-24 provide teachings on various aspects of life, relationships with elders, and conduct towards magistrates, among other topics.⁶

Furthermore, both traditions underscore the importance of fearing the deity as part of wisdom. Hebrew Wisdom states that the fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom.⁷

Disparity between ANE Wisdom and Hebrew Wisdom

Although there are similarities between ANE Wisdom and Hebrew Wisdom, there are also differences. One distinguishing difference is that YHWH is the origin of Hebrew Wisdom, therefore Hebrew Wisdom staunchly upholds monotheism, a singular, transcendent God, YHWH. ANE Wisdom on the other hand embraces polytheism, a belief system in a multitude of gods governing different aspects of life. This is one of the major theological contrasts in ANE Wisdom and Hebrew Wisdom.

Another disparity is that ANE Wisdom literature emerges as imparting practical knowledge to lead the best life now, govern society effectively, acquire earthly materials, maintain earthly relationships, taking more of a pragmatic approach. In contrast, Hebrew Wisdom emanates from the covenantal relationship with YHWH. It supersedes earthly prosperity, extending further to obeying the living God. The essence of Hebrew wisdom lies in adhering to YHWH, which goes deeper than practicality. The birth of wisdom materializes from the fear of YHWH. It goes beyond practical knowledge, it involves embracing divine order in its totality.

⁴ Hess, Richard S. “Poetic Books.” Chapter. In *The Old Testament - a Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction*, 389. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2016.

⁵ Hess, Richard S. “Proverbs.” Chapter. In *The Old Testament - a Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction*, 466. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2016.

⁶ Hess, Richard S. “Proverbs.” Chapter. In *The Old Testament - a Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction*, 467. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2016.

⁷ Proverbs 9:10 (English Standard Version)

The overarching purpose of Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament is to teach readers to know God, fear God, and lead godly lives. Even though there are similarities with ANE Wisdom Literature, Hebrew Wisdom prevails because of its eternal values associated with it.

Question 2- In class, Dr. Wilson suggested that to properly understand Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, one must view all three books in light of one another. Write an essay discussing your thoughts on Dr. Wilson's statement. You may consult Hess (or any other source), but cite numerous examples from the biblical books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes to back up your assertion.

After reading and contemplating all three wisdom books, I wholeheartedly agree with Dr. Wilson's statement.

Firstly, It is crucial to engage all three books in conjunction with one another to comprehend the phenomenon of suffering. The story of Job evokes a deep philosophical question: why do people suffer? Or more specifically, why did Job suffer? In Job's book, we learn that Job never finds out why he suffered. Similarly, most of the time, we never find answers to questions about suffering. However, when we read the book of Ecclesiastes, we have an answer. Suffering is a ramification of the fallen world, and as a result, we will face that season of suffering. The preacher in the Book of Ecclesiastes states that there is time to weep and time for celebration.⁸

The book of Job and Ecclesiastes offers us good news: regardless of trials and adversities, God is ever-present, rescuing us from evil.⁹

Additionally, the Book of Proverbs emphasizes that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer.¹⁰ Job poses a crucial question that greatly perplexes his comforters: why do the wicked prosper?¹¹ In their misguided presumption, the comforters accuse Job of committing sin and concealing it. If one is to read the book of Job by itself, a similar conclusion might be drawn. However, in light of all three books, we comprehend that the righteous indeed suffer, and conversely, the wicked indeed prosper, however, the righteous will rise seven times, and the end of the wicked is pitiful. The righteous rise because God is on their side.¹² Upon reading all three wisdom books, we arrive at the realization that the phenomenon of suffering is not simply the consequence of sin, instead, we discover divine justice, the sovereignty of God, and human choices at play.

Secondly, It is crucial to engage all three books in conjunction with one another to comprehend the phenomenon of justice. The book of Proverbs consistently emphasizes the notion that the righteous prosper and the wicked perish.¹³ This is the ideal form of justice that brings joy to the righteous. However, when we delve into the Book of Job, such a straightforward conclusion is challenged. We learn that the righteous too suffer. If we were to simply read the

⁸ Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (English Standard Version)

⁹ Job 42, Ecclesiastes 12:14 (English Standard Version)

¹⁰ Proverbs 11:10-20 (English Standard Version)

¹¹ Job 21:7 (English Standard Version)

¹² Proverbs 24:16; Job 42:12 (English Standard Version)

¹³ Proverbs 11:10-20 (English Standard Version)

Book of Proverbs, there is a possibility of misinterpretation, cultivating the expectation that life should be seamless and prosperous for the righteous. Hence, it is important to read the Book of Job. The book of Proverbs asserts that the wicked face certain justice, yet we have observed the wicked escape retribution on earth.¹⁴ To reconcile this disparity we must turn to the book of Ecclesiastes. Here, we are reminded that the wicked may elude justice on earth, however, God will render justice in heaven.¹⁵

Upon reading all three books, it is evident that not everyone receives the due judgment they deserve on earth, however, in the end, God will execute a precise justice for both the righteous and the wicked.

Take a position (allegorical referring to God and Israel, allegorical referring to Christ and the church, love poetry) concerning the interpretation of Song of Solomon. Be sure to cite any secondary sources.

The Songs of Solomon, I believe, is a literal poem rather than an allegorical poem. My position on this may vary in the future; however, this is what I believe presently. Here are several reasons why I believe so:

Literary Style

The Song of Solomon upholds the conventional style of Hebrew poetry which is clear in its use of metaphor, parallelism, and vivid imagery found in other places in the Bible. For example, consider the synonymous parallelism in Proverbs 3:5 and Songs of Solomon 4:1.¹⁶

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.”

And,

“Behold, you are beautiful, my love,
behold, you are beautiful!
Your eyes are doves behind your veil.”

In this example, the expression of poetic expression is evident.

Explicit Imagery

The Songs of Solomon contains sensual language, describing the physical aspects of the lovers.

For example, in Songs of Solomon 4:1-6 ESV, Here vivid portrayal of the bride’s beauty unfolds. The poetic language is used to describe different parts of her body. It appears difficult to attribute

¹⁴ Proverbs 21:15 (English Standard Version)

¹⁵ Ecclesiastes 12:14 (English Standard Version)

¹⁶ Hess, Richard S. “Psalms.” Chapter. In *The Old Testament - a Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction*, 432-434. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2016.

this sort of literary language to God and His people as an allegory. Instead, it supports the argument for a literal interpretation that describes the celebration of love in a tangible manner.

Practical Wisdom:

The Book of Songs of Solomon includes practical wisdom, one aspect of which is a warning not to stir up romantic love before it is time.¹⁷ This aspect also makes it difficult to allegorize this part of the poem. For instance, who is here not supposed to arouse love? How does this abstinence pertain to Israel and His people or Christ and the Church? It becomes challenging to allegorize without the risk of adding our interpretation, especially when the author has not clarified the intention of allegorizing the poem. Hence, I would argue that the emphasis is on exercising caution and wisdom in love.

Parallels with Ancient Near East (ANE) Love Poetry

There is a historical consistency between the Songs of Solomon with other love poetry ANE.¹⁸ There is a similarity in themes with ancient Sumerian literature.¹⁹ For example:

“My vulva, the horn,
The boat of Heaven, Is full of eagerness like the young moon.
My untilled land lies fallow.
As for me, Inanna, Who will plow my vulva?
Who will plow my high field?
Who will plow my wet ground?”

This Sumerian love poem employs metaphors and explicit language to describe the physical beauty of the lover, akin to the literary style found in the Songs of Solomon. It is important to note that drawing parallels is not an endorsement of divine influence on Sumerian poems nor diminishes the inspired word of God in the Song. However, similar themes were identified in both cultures, which opens a door for speculations such as: whether the author wrote it to portray how a YHWH-centered marriage should look.

¹⁷ Songs of Solomon 2:7, 3:5, 8:4 (English Standard Version)

¹⁸ Fee, Gordon D, and Douglas Stuart. “Wisdom: Then and Now.” Chapter. In *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 254. 4th ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014.

¹⁹ Kramer, Samuel Noah. “The Biblical ‘Song of Songs’ and the Sumerian Love Songs.” Expedition Magazine. Last modified September 1962. Accessed February 18, 2024. <https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/the-biblical-song-of-songs-and-the-sumerian-love-songs/>. Originally published in 1962

So, the pivotal question is: why is this book in the canon? The ultimate purpose of it is to point us to God's love. As Hess pointed out, "The power of sexual love is as "strong as death" and serves as a sign pointing to understanding something of God's love (Songs 8:6)."²⁰

Additionally, this poetic book stands as an example of passion in a sacred marriage. Throughout the Bible, strong caution is decreed against sexual immorality and virtually no depiction of sacred love and passion in a godly marriage. Thus this book serves the purpose of bridging that gap. Hess states, "The Song provides that balance and moves the world that appreciates sex as something to be enjoyed as an act of worship to the Creator."²¹

Furthermore, Fee and Stewart state, "The Song was associated with Solomon, whose name was synonymous with wisdom. But at a deeper level, it deals explicitly with a category of wisdom found in Proverbs: the "wise choice" of marital and sexual fidelity".²²

In the end, this Book, Songs of Solomon is purposely included in the Bible to encourage the readers to enjoy the passion of love in marriage. It also promotes monogamous relationships, fidelity, warding off the temptation to cheat, the preciousness of love, its joys and pleasures, and the dangers of infidelity.²³ Ultimately this book paints the picture of truthful and fulfilled marriage in God.

²⁰ Hess, Richard S. "Songs of Solomon." Chapter. In *The Old Testament - a Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction*, 507. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2016.

²¹ Hess, Richard S. "Songs of Solomon." Chapter. In *The Old Testament - a Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction*, 508. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2016.

²² Fee, Gordon D, and Douglas Stuart. "Wisdom: Then and Now." Chapter. In *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 254. 4th ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014.

²³ Fee, Gordon D, and Douglas Stuart. "Wisdom: Then and Now." Chapter. In *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 257. 4th ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014.