

WISDOM LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

The wisdom literature of the Bible is usually identified as the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Wisdom is connected with wise men or sages, just as law is connected with the priest and the word with the prophet.

In Jewish tradition, Solomon is *the* wise man of the ages, for we are told in 1 Kings 4:31-33 that he was wiser than all others. Besides his wisdom about nature, he spoke 3,000 proverbs and composed 1,005 songs. To Solomon, therefore, tradition attributes the writing of most of the Proverbs, all of Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

WISDOM IN THE BIBLICAL WORLD

Thanks to archaeological research in the past 150 years, we know today that wisdom literature similar to that in the Bible existed long before Solomon in the biblical world. From ancient Babylonia, Syria, and Egypt have come examples of ancient wisdom. The Egyptian wisdom is the most important because of the close connections that the people of the Nile Valley had with ancient Canaan and Israel over long periods of time.

Biblical wisdom shares basic characteristics with the wisdom of the ancient Near East. First, wisdom is focused on the individual rather than the nation. The law taught by the priest is concerned primarily with statutes and commandments that keep the nation holy before God. The prophets emphasize the moral requirements of God and the shortcomings of the people that threaten national judgment. But the sages provide instruction for the individual.

The wisdom of Babylonia and Egypt consists of the two types that we meet in the Bible—practical and philosophical. Practical wisdom helps the individual develop a sane, workable attitude toward

life. Wisdom includes technical skills, such as weaving and goldsmithing; administrative skills, such as governing and leading in war; and artistic skills, such as composing poetry and songs or playing musical instruments. The sayings are short and easy to remember. They help the individual get along with others. The intent of practical wisdom is to guide a person through the difficulties of life to success.

Biblical wisdom was practical, but also religious. It was not concerned with religious ritual, but it was always understood that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge [wisdom]” (Proverbs 1:7). Wisdom was recognized as coming from God, but it was frequently portrayed as a woman (see Proverbs 1:20-33; 3:13-20; and 8:1-31). This personification of wisdom helps us understand the personification of the Word (Logos) in John 1:1-18.

Job and Ecclesiastes are two examples of the philosophical type of wisdom in the Bible. They wrestle with such issues as why the innocent suffer and how to find a rational explanation for the purpose of life in the face of humankind’s inevitable death.

WISDOM LITERATURE AND THE BIBLE

Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are found in the third section of the Hebrew Bible. This section seems to be held together by the idea of wisdom, just as the Pentateuch is by law and the prophetic section is by the idea of the prophetic word. Thus Psalms can be seen as the result of wisdom, along with the other collections of poems, Lamentations, and Song of Solomon. Daniel is included in this third section, rather than among the prophets, because Daniel is clearly a sage.

Biblical wisdom literature, though written at least 2500 to 3000 years ago, is a vital source of moral instruction today.