

PROVERBS ECCLESIASTES SONG OF SOLOMON



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Palestinian farmer in field of ripe grain

This lesson deals with three books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. These three books fall together primarily for two reasons. First, tradition ascribes all three books to Solomon; and second, all three books relate to ancient Israelite wisdom.

The Old Testament presents Solomon as the wisest of men in ancient times. Read 1 Kings 4:32-34, which indicates something of Solomon's wide learning and wisdom.

This passage presents Solomon as not only the composer of proverbs and songs but also the writer of encyclopedic works about plants, beasts, birds, reptiles, and fish.

Each of these books begins with a state-

ment that attributes it to Solomon. Proverbs begins "The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel." Ecclesiastes opens with "The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem." The third book begins "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's."

Scholars today do not assume that Solomon wrote any of these books. The language and ideas in the books suggest a time much later in Israel's history than the reign of Solomon. The Book of Proverbs itself attributes much of the material contained within it to persons other than Solomon. Perhaps Solomon's reputation as the wisest of men and the patron saint of

wisdom in Israel led later editors and writers to credit material to him. Two books—The Wisdom of Solomon and The Psalms of Solomon—are ascribed to him but are in the Apocrypha, not in the Protestant Bible. Let us now look at the three books in this lesson.

PROVERBS

The Book of Proverbs takes its name from its content. The book contains proverbs or wise sayings that offer advice and make suggestions about the art of living. The Hebrew word that translates as *proverb* has a wider range of meaning than our term *proverb*. In Hebrew, a proverb, or *masal*, designates material ranging from short pithy sayings to long discourses or complex allegories.

The Book of Proverbs is actually made up of seven smaller collections. Each collection has its own introduction. Most of these collections relate to Solomon in some way, although they also refer to such unknown writers as Agur and Lemuel.

Some of the wisdom found in the Book of Proverbs is more like what we call philosophy. We find examples of this type of wisdom in Proverbs 1 to 9. Perhaps the Israelites used these chapters in school where students were considered to be the son of the teacher, who was called “the father.”

These longer poems personify wisdom and folly as two women who invite the student to embrace them and live with them.

Read the introduction to the Book of Proverbs in 1:2-7. Then answer the following questions.

a. What was the purpose for which the book was written? Write the purpose in your own words.

b. According to verse 7, how can we begin to acquire knowledge? What must we do first?

Most of the Book of Proverbs is made up of two-line sayings or proverbs. The collection that begins with Proverbs 10:1 and extends to Proverbs 22:16 contains 375 individual proverbs. Many of these proverbs are similar in intent to our sayings such as “Haste makes waste,” or “A stitch in time saves nine.” They attempt to sum up an insight into life in a catchy and easily memorized fashion.

The proverbs take various forms. Some are merely descriptions of persons and actions. Read Proverbs 10:26 as one example.

Sometimes the proverb states the truth in such a way that the truth appears to be the opposite of what it is. An example is Proverbs 13:24. Turn to this proverb and read it.

And turning to Proverbs 17:1, we find that one particular type of life is preferable to another kind. Read Proverbs 17:1.

These simple proverbs were probably a part of the folk culture of ancient Israel. They were used wherever people were learning how to live life in the best way. Above all, parents and grandparents used these proverbs in teaching their children what was expected of them in life and what were the best ways to confront life with all its problems and difficulties.

We can sum up the philosophy of life found in the Book of Proverbs in several statements. First of all, the book and its practical wisdom assume that a person can discover a general order to life and existence through wisdom and thought. Second, once one discovers the order of

existence, then a person can live in harmony with that order in the realm of creation. Third, one tends to get out of life what one puts into it. As we would say, you reap what you sow. Fourth, one ought to live a life based on self-interest that serves and loves others, because in the long run, such love and service benefit everyone concerned.

1. Proverbs emphasizes the power of words and speech, for good and for ill. Read the following passages, and write down what you learned from them about words and speeches.

a. (10:19)

b. (12:18)

c. (15:1)

d. (16:28)

e. (18:13)

f. (20:19)

g. (27:2)

2. Proverbs also emphasizes family relationships. Read the following passages, and write down what you learned from them.

a. (13:24)

b. (15:20)

c. (20:20)

d. (29:15)

ECCLESIASTES 1:1-3:15

When we turn to the Book of Ecclesiastes, we encounter a book almost totally opposite from the Book of Proverbs. Some translations of the Bible also call this book "The Teacher," which is a translation of the Greek term *Ecclesiastes*. The writer of this book teaches a philosophy of life that he sums up in his motto: "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." Or, as we may loosely translate it: "Nonsense, Nonsense! Everything is nonsense."

If we look at the early chapters of Ecclesiastes, we can see some of the emphases of the writer. The first ten verses promote the idea that there is nothing new under the sun—life is simply the same old thing over and over again.

In Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 the writer argues that wisdom does not give a person the key to life, since knowledge raises more questions. In Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 the writer argues that life's happiness is not found in the search for pleasure. The rest of Chapter 2 expounds the idea that death robs persons



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Types of weights used in everyday life in Bible times

of both wisdom and the fruit of toil. In Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 the writer tells us that although a predetermined pattern for life exists, we can neither understand nor change it.

According to the writer of Ecclesiastes, what things are really empty in our lives? List the examples of empty things found in the following verses.

a. (1:16-18)

b. (2:1)

c. (2:18-20)

d. (5:10)

ECCLESIASTES 3:16-12:14

The rest of Chapter 3 and all of Chapter 4 demonstrate that life has no justice and that persons cannot count on a life after death where matters will make sense. The remaining eight chapters of the book develop in various ways the central ideas found in the first four chapters.

In many ways Ecclesiastes seems to dispute and disprove the philosophy of life found in the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs is very optimistic about life and very positive about human potential to do the best in life. Ecclesiastes is the skeptical opposite.

Yet while Ecclesiastes appears to be very negative, it is not totally so. Ecclesiastes recommends that a person enjoy life as much as possible and engage in some work that is enjoyable. Above all do not expect too much of life nor live wickedly and foolishly. Read Ecclesiastes 3:12-13. These verses give us the basic philosophy of the book.

SONG OF SOLOMON

The third book in this lesson is Song of Solomon. This book is a collection of love poems describing courtship, love, and human intimacy. The poems depict the male and female lovers in very sensuous and erotic imagery. The popularity of these songs through their association with Solomon and their use in wedding festivities established them firmly in the lives of the Israelites. Christian tradition has interpreted Song of Solomon as an allegory of the covenant love between God and God's people. These songs became part of sacred Scripture because their writer was said to be King Solomon.

Read Song of Solomon 8:6-7, in which the writer discusses the nature of love. List three evidences of the power of love that are found in these verses.

a. (8:6)

b. (8:7)

c. (8:7)

SUMMARY

Four kinds of Wisdom Literature are found in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

1. Long poems that praise the pursuit of wisdom (Proverbs 1–9)
2. Short poems that give insight into life (Proverbs 10–26)

3. A treatise on the theme “All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1–12)
4. A collection of love poetry (Song of Solomon 1–8)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The Book of Proverbs gives advice for daily living. These proverbs were probably produced in the everyday life of the people of ancient Israel. Read aloud at random from Chapters 10–26 in Proverbs. What issues did you encounter in Proverbs that are relevant for your life today? Share with the group any nonbiblical proverbs that you know or use as a guide to right action or thought.
2. According to a Jewish tradition, Solomon wrote Song of Solomon when he was young, Proverbs when he was middle-aged, and Ecclesiastes when he was old. What characteristics of these books may have contributed to the development of that tradition?
3. Song of Solomon was included in the Old Testament canon because tradition assumed that it was written by Solomon. But critical scholarship has discounted the possibility that Solomon wrote this love poetry. Protestant tradition has tended to de-emphasize this book because of its largely secular quality. This sensual poetry about the love between a man and a woman is not expressly religious. What other reasons can you think of for its inclusion in the Old Testament?

DAILY READINGS FOR ISAIAH

- Day 1: Isaiah 5:1-7
Day 2: Isaiah 6:1-13
Day 3: Isaiah 7:1-17
Day 4: Isaiah 40:1-11
Day 5: Isaiah 45:1-13
Day 6: Isaiah 52:13–53:12
Day 7: Isaiah 61:1-11