# THE EQUIP INSTITUTE Theme: Christian Story

Topic: Old Testament Survey: Wisdom Literature and

Poetry Fall 2023

#### Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. This fall, we are spending twelve weeks studying the Christian Story. The past two weeks, we have studied the Pentateuch and the Historical Books. This week, we will survey the Old Testament Wisdom Literature.

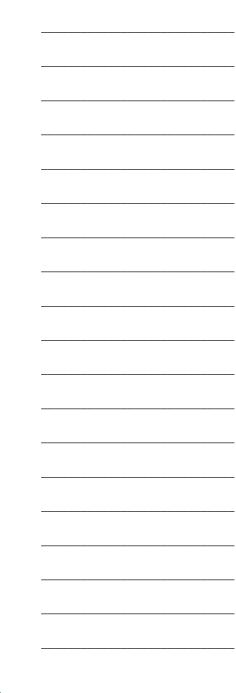
## An Introduction to Wisdom Literature and Poetry

According to the ESV Study Bible, biblical wisdom "might be defined as skill in the art of godly living, or more fully, that orientation which allows one to live in harmonious accord with God's ordering of the world." The Jewish understanding of wisdom is rooted in fear of Yahweh (Prov. 1:7), which means a wholehearted devotion to the one God who is perfectly holy and is the Creator, Ruler, and Judge of all peoples. Normally, biblical wisdom is concerned with the art of faithful living, but sometimes can be more philosophical.

The Old Testament has much to say about wisdom. There are limits to human wisdom since we are finite creatures. Our sin leads us to often ignore God's wisdom. Generally, heeding God's wisdom leads to flourishing while rejecting His wisdom leads to various forms of suffering. One fruit of enjoying a covenant relationship with God is a life characterized by godly wisdom, which includes sincere worship and faithful obedience to Torah. Wisdom should be passed on from generation to generation.

Poetry accounts for about 50% of the Old Testament, but it is especially identified with the Psalms and Song of Solomon. Though Hebrew Poetry is its own genre, it is also often considered a subset of wisdom literature. The most important theme of Hebrew poetry is faithfulness to the Lord, which includes wise living.

Old Testament Wisdom Literature, including Hebrew poetry, is similar in form and even many emphases to pagan writings in the Ancient Near East. What





differentiates the biblical writings is their wholehearted devotion to Yahweh. This means Wisdom Literature had an apologetic function, challenging rival worldviews, but in a form that would have been familiar to many of the people groups who would have encountered the Jews.

# <u>Job</u>

Job is named for the main character in the book. The authorship is anonymous and the date is unknown. The setting is the time of the Patriarchs, placing it early in the Bible's chronology. However, the author cites from Psalms and Isaiah, meaning the book itself was written sometimes between the exile (587–538 BC) and before about 200 BC, when the earliest copies of Job are available. Chapters 1–2 are a prologue that establishes Job's character. Chapters 3–41 offer a series of dialogues between Job and his friends about why Job is suffering. Chapter 42 is a conclusion where Job submits to God, he experiences restoration, and his friends are rebuked.

# Key Themes:

- God is sovereign over evil and suffering and His character remains unchanging
- We can trust God, even when we cannot understand our own suffering
- God is not afraid of hard questions when they are asked sincerely from a posture of faith
- The wisdom of humans is confounded by the wisdom of God

### **Psalms**

Psalms is named for the Greek word *psalmos*, which means "song." The Hebrew title of the book is *Tehillim*, which means "praises." The book is sometimes referred to as the Psalter because it is a collection of psalms. The book has many authors, the most famous of whom was David, who wrote about half of the psalms. The oldest psalm (Psa. 90) dates to the time of Moses (ca. 1400 BC), about half were written during the time of David (ca. 1000 BC), and likely the compilation was completed during the time of Ezra (ca. 400–450 BC). Psalms 1–2 are an introduction to the Psalter. The remainder of the work is divided into five books: Book 1 (Psa. 3–41); Book 2 (Psa. 42–72); Book 3 (Psa. 73–89); Book 4 (Psa. 90–106); Book 5 (Psa. 107–150).


Four debates about Psalms: First, scholars are not sure whether the biblical titles of the psalms are original or were added later. Second, scholars are not certain of the meaning of the various technical Hebrew terms (e.g. Selah, Higgaion, Maskil). Third, scholars debate whether certain psalms were put together because they were originally interpreted messianically. Finally, Christians have debated throughout history the place of the psalms in new covenant worship.

There are dozens of themes in the various psalms, which can depend upon such factors as who wrote the psalm, the occasion for the psalm, and where it is included in the Psalter.

- Psalms of Lament
- Psalms of Praise
- Psalms of Thanksgiving
- Wisdom Psalms
- Imprecatory Psalms
- Royal Psalms
- Historical Psalms

#### **Proverbs**

Proverbs is named for the sort of saying collected in the book. Solomon was the author of most of the proverbs and their primary compiler, though it seems that the final form of the collection was completed during Hezekiah's reign (Prov. 25:1). This would date primary authorship between 971 and 931 BC and final form between 715 and 686 BC. Proverbs 1:1–7 is an introduction to the book. Proverbs 1:8–9:18 is a father's call for his son to exercise godly wisdom. Proverbs 10:1–22:16 include Solomon's shorter proverbs. Proverbs 22:17–31:9 include proverbs written by others, but likely collected by Solomon. Proverbs 31:10–31 is a poetic acrostic extoling the virtues of a godly woman.

The major theme of Proverbs is that a life of godly wisdom is rooted in covenant relationship with God, must be pursued intentionally, and normally results in flourishing. Within that major theme, the proverbs address the following recurring topics:

- Friendship
- Godly speech
- Diligence versus laziness
- Marriage


- Parenting
- Finances
- Ethical living
- Sexual purity
- One's reputation
- The dignity of work

#### **Ecclesiastes**

Ecclesiastes is named for the word *ekklesia* ("assembly"). It is a reference to the first verse of the book, which mentions an unnamed preacher, who presumably would have been addressing an assembly. The book is officially anonymous, since only the author's title is used. However, historically most Jews and Christians have argued Solomon is the author since the preacher is also called David's son and is referred to as having great wisdom (1:16) and great possessions (2:7). The book can be dated to the tenth century BC.

It is best to Ecclesiastes as an extended poetic reflection on the following key themes:

- The world is fallen and thus nothing seems certain
- Sin and death are the experience of all people
- Life is filled with vanity, meaning everything can seem fleeting, ephemeral, faddish, and even incomprehensible
- Work leads to both frustration and joy
- In the midst of brokenness, God gives good gifts to all people, blessing even unbelievers
- All who are wise will understand the above and respond with fear of Yahweh, the One who remains certain and who desires all to flourish by worshiping and serving Him

## Song of Solomon

Song of Solomon is named for Solomon, who either wrote the book, or in whose honor the book was written. Jewish and Christian scholars are divided as to the authorship, in part because the details in the book are difficult to reconcile with what we know about Solomon. However, most scholars still date it to Solomon's reign in the tenth century BC, arguing that even if Solomon was not the author, it was possibly a poem written in his honor.

Song of Solomon is arguably the most hotly debated book in all of Scripture. There is no consensus on how

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best to interpret the book. While most all interpreters agree Song of Solomon honors married love, it also includes relatively graphic explanations of sexual intimacy. The latter is the reason why some Jews and Christians argue it should not be part of the canon. There are three major ways to interpret the book.

Option 1: Song of Solomon is an allegorical poem symbolizing the love between God and His covenant

Option 1: Song of Solomon is an allegorical poem symbolizing the love between God and His covenant people. This has been the most popular view throughout Christian history. However, the sexual language has always made some readers uncomfortable. Allegorical interpretation has fallen out of favor since the time of the Reformation. Since the 19th century, this view has been unpopular with most Bible scholars.

Option 2: Song of Solomon is a poem about two commoners who love each other. The woman is wooed by King Solomon to join his harem, but she ultimately leaves him to be reunited with her true love, whom she marries. The most important concern with this interpretation is that it is not always clear when the woman is speaking to her true love and when she is speaking to Solomon. It also seems a less straightforward reading of the book.

Option 3: Song of Solomon is a poem honoring the dignity of marriage and sexual intimacy. There are two problems with this interpretation. First, the book would likely not have been accepted in the canon if this had been the dominant understanding in earlier centuries. Second, this interpretation seems like a strange fit with the rest of the Wisdom Literature.

# Recommended Resources

Christopher J.H. Wright, The Old Testament in Seven Sentences: A Small Introduction to a Vast Topic (InterVarsity, 2019).

Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, A Survey of the Old Testament, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Zondervan, 2000).

Eugene H. Merrill, Mark Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti, The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament (B&H Academic, 2011).

Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (IVP Academic, 2014).
