

Interpreting a Biblical Passage

Genre – Wisdom

Hebrew wisdom is about ordering life according to God's intended order of the world. The biblical wisdom books are Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and James; the Apocrypha includes Ecclesiasticus (Ben Sirach) and Wisdom of Solomon. There are several "wisdom psalms," and wisdom is scattered throughout the Bible (e.g., Isa 5.21; Jer 31.29).

Forms of Wisdom

- *Proverbs* – concise, memorable declarations about life as it is or should be, often urging a particular action. Proverbs teach *probability* based on how life *generally* works; they are not *promises*. Every "hardworking farmer" is not *guaranteed* a bountiful crop, but will *generally* do better than daydreamers (Prov 28.19).
- *Instruction* – passionately expressed commands or prohibitions, often with consequences (Prov 22.22-23)
- *Autobiography* – examples or reflections given from a first-person perspective ("I went past the field of the sluggard"), concluding with a moral (e.g., Prov 24.30-34; common in Ecclesiastes but morals appear less frequently.)
- *Dialogue* – speeches attempting to persuade the audience to some point of view. This technique dominates **Job**, climaxing in God's speeches (Job 38-39, 40-41).
- *Riddle* – sayings designed to puzzle and perplex the audience, testing them (e.g., Judges 14.14; Isaiah 6.9; Rev 13.18). Riddles are difficult to understand and often elude interpretation (or even translation! Compare Prov 26.10 in the KJV and NIV).
- *Allegory* – an extended metaphor that contains its interpretation within itself (e.g., Prov 5.15-23; Eccl 12.1-7).
- *Psalms* – focusing on wisdom, these psalms show several characteristics of wisdom, including: acrostics (each verse begins successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet), numerical sayings ("six things the Lord hates"), "blessed" sayings, "better" sayings ("better the little of the righteous than the wicked's wealth"), comparisons/admonitions, father-son addresses, use of proverbs, similes, rhetorical questions, direction ("listen to me"). (See Pss 1, 19.7-14, 32, 34, 37, 49, 78, 111, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133.)

Reading and Applying Biblical Wisdom

- Recognize a passage's form as well as its incorporation of other literary features (e.g., parallelism)
- Treat poetry as poetic; avoid reading figurative language literally
- Look for expressed "morals"
- Treat wisdom as *general principles* and not *promises*. There *will be* exceptions.
- Both **Job** and **Ecclesiastes** present expanded reflections on wisdom's *exceptions*, exploring how to navigate life when proverbial wisdom *doesn't* work. (Compare the Psalmist's lament, "Why do the wicked prosper?" [Psa 73.3].) To understand its message, each book must be taken as a **whole unit**:
 - *Job* – Job begins with a narrative that establishes Job's claim to innocence and concludes with God's speech and ultimate vindication of Job. The individual speeches throughout Job represent contrasting "wise" ways to explain suffering, each of them commonly "true." But trumping all wisdom is **God's** speech at the end which concludes: in spite of appearances to the contrary, God is sovereign over the apparent chaos in the world.
 - *Ecclesiastes* – In opposition to **Proverbs**, Ecclesiastes points out that life *doesn't* always work the way it's supposed to; "meaningless, meaningless" is the sage's refrain. The conclusion informs the rest: in spite of all appearances to the contrary, "Fear God and keep his commandments" (Eccl 12.13-14).
 - For both Job and Ecclesiastes, the **conclusion** both tempers and provides the lens by which we evaluate whatever "true wisdom" appears in the sayings before it.