



Wisdom Literature

What is Wisdom Literature?

“Wisdom literature” is the generic label for the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (=Qoheleth) and Job in the Hebrew Bible. Two other major wisdom books, the Book of Ben Sira (=Ecclesiasticus) and the Wisdom of Solomon, are found in the Apocrypha, but are accepted as canonical in the Catholic tradition. Some psalms (e.g. 1, 19, 119) are regarded as “wisdom psalms” by analogy with the main wisdom books, and other similar writings are found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The label derives simply from the fact that “wisdom” and “folly” are discussed frequently in these books. The designation is an old one, going back at least to St. Augustine. Wisdom is instructional literature, in which direct address is the norm. It may consist of single sentences, proverbial or hortatory, strung together, or of longer poems and discourses, some of which tend toward the philosophical.

From early times, wisdom was associated with King Solomon. According to 1 Kings 4:29-34,

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the sea-shore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt . . . He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon.

This report is undoubtedly legendary, but it is interesting in some respects. “Wisdom” was an international phenomenon, and people from different countries could appreciate it. (The primary Old Testament wisdom books, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job, do not even mention Israel or its history). It was concerned with nature rather than with history. In the ancient world it was associated especially with Egypt. We have numerous Egyptian instructional discourses, stretching back to the third millennium BCE, attributed to such figures as Amenemhet and Ptahhotep (third millennium), Amenemope and Ani (second millennium), and numerous others. They consist of maxims relating to proper behavior and success in life. They typically deal with relations with other people, both superiors and inferiors, friends and enemies. They often warn

about relations with women. They inculcate composure and reserve. The “heated man” is the antithesis of the wise. The Instruction of Amenemope is especially noteworthy for its reverence for “the Lord of all” and for the protection of the weak. The biblical wisdom tradition bears a general similarity to the Egyptian and was clearly influenced by it in some cases. The publication of the Instruction of Amenemope in 1923 led to the discovery of close parallels between this work and Prov 22:17–23:11, and to the conclusion that the biblical work drew directly on the Egyptian one.

In Egypt and other ancient Near Eastern countries, proverbial and instructional literature was used in the education of scribes. Indeed, proverbs were used in elementary education down to modern times. Children learned to write by copying them and learned elementary behavioral lessons at the same time. There were no public schools in ancient Israel; schools are said to have been introduced in Judea in the first century BCE. But there were certainly scribal schools, where a small number of people learned to write so they could serve as scribes for king and temple. Ben Sira, in the early second century BCE, refers to his “school” or house of study (Sir 51:23). The biblical book of Proverbs was very probably composed for instructional purposes. The “setting in life” of Job or Ecclesiastes is less clear.

At one time, scholars believed that Solomon had introduced scribal schools in Jerusalem, after the manner of Egyptian scribal education. He was famously said to have married Pharaoh’s daughter, and so was presumed to have some familiarity with Egypt. Solomon was also credited with a “Solomonic enlightenment” and major biblical sources, such as the Yahwist history in the Pentateuch, were assigned to his reign. That view has lost favor, however. It is now recognized that Jerusalem was a very small place during Solomon’s reign (approximately 950 BCE), and would not have had much need of scribes. (It also seems unlikely that a Pharaoh would have given his daughter to the king of such a small city.) The city expanded considerably more than 200 years later in the reign of King Hezekiah, and wisdom tradition is more likely to have developed at that time. In fact, one section of the Book of Proverbs is said to consist of proverbs that “the men of Hezekiah” collected (Prov 25:1).

Is Wisdom a Genre?

There has been debate as to whether “wisdom” should be considered a literary genre. On the one hand, the wisdom literature consists of a cluster of books that have much in common, and that can helpfully be grouped together. For some scholars, this is enough to justify the classification as a genre. On the other hand, it is not a single literary form like, say, a vision or a psalm. If we were to reserve the label “genre” for a single literary form, then we might say that the “wisdom instruction,” or even proverbial collection, is a genre. “Wisdom” might be described as a macro-genre – a kind of writing that employs a cluster of related literary forms. The use of generic labels in ancient literature is rather haphazard. The Book of Proverbs, for example, is labelled “*mishle Shlomo*,” usually translated “the proverbs of Solomon.” A “*mashal*,” however, is not a direct equivalent of proverb. The term can also apply to a parable or allegory. (The root meaning seems to be something that can be used analogically, but it is not precisely defined.) This is not to say that people did not perceive generic relationships in

antiquity. The fact that what we call “wisdom books” were often said to be “Solomonic” in antiquity is a kind of rudimentary generic analysis. This is true even of books that could not possibly have been written by Solomon, such as the *Wisdom of Solomon*, which is written in good Hellenistic Greek and is plausibly dated around the turn of the era. It also seems clear that the biblical wisdom writers were aware of the affinities between their compositions and Egyptian instructions.

To say that the wisdom books belong to a macro-genre, or to a genre loosely defined, is not to deny that there are significant differences between them. Literary critics increasingly speak of genres in terms of prototype theory. The idea is that we recognize kinds of things by identifying prototypical examples. For example, we might think of a kitchen chair as a prototypical chair and recognize other chairs insofar as they resemble it. A throne, or a piano stool, are also objects to sit on, but significantly different from kitchen chairs. In the case of the biblical wisdom literature, the *Book of Proverbs* is prototypical. *Ecclesiastes* deviates from it in some respects but is still recognizably similar to it. The *Book of Job* is more remote, since it is constructed as dialogue with a narrative frame. The case for including *Job* in the wisdom literature rests primarily on the speeches in the dialogues, which resemble wisdom instructions to a great degree.

A Common Worldview?

Also controversial is the question whether the wisdom literature represents a distinctive worldview in ancient Israel. As we have already noted, *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, and *Job* never refer to Israel or to the events of its history. Should we assume that this is just a matter of genre, and that the same authors might have composed psalms or prophecies on other occasions? Later wisdom literature, such as the *Book of Ben Sira*, *Wisdom of Solomon*, and some of the texts from the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, draw openly on the history of Israel as a source of examples. Ben Sira famously claims that all wisdom is “the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us” (Sir 24:23). There does not seem to be any inherent reason why someone could not refer to the history of Israel in a wisdom instruction. If we do not find such references in the wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible, then we have to conclude that Torah and Hebrew scriptures were not an essential frame of reference for the wisdom teachers. Conversely, it does not seem that the forms of wisdom instruction were necessarily tied to a particular view of the world or of life. *Proverbs*, *Job* and *Ecclesiastes* all agree that there is no judgment after death, and no reason to expect eschatological upheavals or radical changes in the conditions of human life. This is still true of Ben Sira in the early second century BCE. It changes, however, in the wisdom books from the *Dead Sea Scrolls* and in the *Wisdom of Solomon*. The *Wisdom of Solomon*, in fact, regards belief in postmortem judgment as essential for living a moral life (*Wisdom of Solomon* 2-5). It does not seem then that worldview of *Proverbs* must always be the worldview of wisdom literature.

It may be more helpful to think of the biblical wisdom literature as a tradition. Initially, this was literature formulated for the training of scribes in the service of the kingdom. It was not concerned with liturgical traditions or with claims of revelation. It was highly practical in its

focus. After the Babylonian Exile, however, there was no longer a king in Jerusalem, and the High Priest and Temple became the centers of power. The Torah of Moses, which reached its present form sometime in the Persian period, became increasingly important. Eventually, this led to changes in the scribal curriculum. Ben Sira is profuse in his admiration for the High Priest (Sir 50) and cites all the heroes of biblical history as examples of wisdom (Sir 44-49, the Praise of the Fathers). He also identifies wisdom with the Torah of Moses, as noted above, although he does not engage with it in any detail. His book is still an example of instructional literature in the tradition of Proverbs, but he has a wider view of the sources of wisdom.

Viewing wisdom as a tradition also sheds light on some of the differences between the biblical wisdom books. Proverbs assumes, as a basic principle, that there is observable order in the world, and that wisdom and righteousness are rewarded. Job and Ecclesiastes challenge these assumptions quite vigorously. Nonetheless, they stand in the wisdom tradition, because their questions are defined by that tradition. A tradition is not defined by unwavering agreement but has the character of a running argument. The underlying questions remain the same, but the answers can vary in light of changing experience.

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