

## **Wisdom Books**

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of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study (Sheffield, 1987).

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## WISDOM BOOKS

### Introduction

In the context of the historical-critical paradigm, wisdom theology has been much neglected until recently. The strong historical interests of Wellhausen and his followers made wisdom literature seem marginal, with little to offer to OT theology. The OT was supposed to be about God's acts in history, and since OT wisdom literature appears to say little or nothing about God's great saving acts, its secondary status was confirmed for many.

However, recent decades have witnessed renewed interest in wisdom. Scholars have become increasingly aware that OT wisdom is not secular and human-centred, but based on the doctrine of \*creation and (like other ancient Near Eastern wisdom) deeply religious. Today it is recognized that wisdom has a major contribution to make to OT theology, although there is considerable disagreement about how the different strands of the OT are interrelated. The rise of literary criticism as a technique of biblical interpretation has made possible an examination of the OT wisdom books as literary entities, and this is proving a most fruitful source of theological insights. It is also acknowledged that wisdom schools may have played a key role in the final editing of the canon, and that OT wisdom is an indispensable part of the background to the Jesus tradition and thus of any satisfactory biblical theology.

### The fear of the LORD

\*Proverbs, \*Job and \*Ecclesiastes all assert that the \*fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 16:6; 31:30; Job 28:28; Eccles. 5:7; 12:13). The wisdom books of the OT include some references to its historical literature, but not many. However, the assertion that the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom indicates that the writers assumed the validity of the historical and \*prophetic traditions. Yahweh (see Exod. 3 and 6) is the name of \*Israel's redeemer \*God who rescues the nation from slavery in Egypt and brings them to himself (see Exod. 19).

Thus from a canonical perspective wisdom begins with a holy reverence for the One who has rescued Israel and brought her to himself. Wisdom in this sense is not separate from Yahweh's \*redemptive acts but a response to them. The close canonical link between wisdom and \*Solomon (1 Kgs. 3-4; Prov. 1:1; Eccles. 1:1) confirms the link between wisdom and Israel's history. (See also \*Genesis to Kings.)

The fear of Yahweh as the beginning of wisdom should be understood in two ways. First, if wisdom is about knowing how to live a successful \*life in God's world, then the fear of the LORD is the indispensable starting point. The route to true wisdom will not be found apart from the particularity of God's \*salvation of Israel. The OT here firmly rejects human autonomy as the path to \*truth and thus delineates a pre-theoretical epistemology. The OT wisdom writers often appeal to observation to support their views, and this might appear to contradict their taking Yahweh as their starting point. However, as M. Fox rightly points out (*Qoheleth and His Contradictions*) wisdom's epistemology is not empiricism. It is not neutral observation which is used to support wisdom, but observation through Yahwistic glasses.

Wisdom's stress on the fear of the LORD as the starting point for wisdom presupposes that alternative starting points are a real possibility. Indeed, the doctrine of the two ways is fundamental to the theology of the wisdom books: ultimately one follows either Yahweh's ways or those of folly (*cf.* Ps. 1). Thus the wisdom books assume the context of a fallen world in which folly is a constant temptation.

Secondly, the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom in that it is the start of a journey rather than a final destination. God's acts of salvation, from this perspective, are the basis of a journey of exploration and discovery constrained only by the limits God has placed upon his creation. Wisdom based on the fear of Yahweh enables humans to use their resources to explore God's \*world.

From such a perspective it is clear that wisdom holds redemption and creation closely together and knows nothing of the modern sacred/secular divide. For OT wisdom Yahweh the redeemer is the creator; those who start with him are led to a right understanding of how his world works.

### Creation and OT wisdom

In Proverbs, underlying the metaphors of the two ways, the two houses and the two women, is an understanding of creation as ordered by God. Finding wisdom means discovering how to follow the order that God has built into his world. In Proverbs the foundation of wisdom in creation is discussed in two places in particular: 3:19–20 and 8:22–31. Job 28 includes a hymn about wisdom and creation, and Job 38–41 reflects at length on creation. The earth, according to Proverbs, was ‘founded by wisdom’ and Lady Wisdom was present throughout God’s creation of the world and delighted in it. In Proverbs 8 (as elsewhere in Prov. 1–9), wisdom is personified as Lady Wisdom, but it is unclear how this figure is to be understood. Some see her as a personification of Yahweh’s own wisdom by which he created the world. However, the poem distinguishes her from Yahweh, just as elsewhere in the OT the angel of the LORD, the word of the LORD and the name of the LORD are associated with but distinguished from Yahweh. The main points of the chapter are that Yahweh founded the world by this ‘wisdom’ and that true human wisdom is found by following it. Like the major cultures of the ancient Near East, the OT wisdom books affirm an overall order in creation.

Because the fabric of creation comes from God, wisdom is found and is to be sought in every area of human life. Wisdom is not restricted to family and cultic life. Proverbs stresses that wisdom’s call is heard in the city centres: the city gates which were the place of government and justice, and the market squares, which were the economic centres (e.g. Prov. 8:1–3). God’s people are called to be wise in all areas of life by locating and living according to his norms.

The woman of Proverbs 31 is placed at the end of the book as a paradigm of the wise person. Scholars have struggled to understand how this woman can be an example of a person who fears the LORD when the activities in which she engages are all ‘secular’. The Reformers achieved a breakthrough in the interpretation of this passage by realizing that all life is sacred and that this wise woman’s fear of the LORD manifests itself *in* her activities as housewife, international trader in high quality fabrics and estate agent. In these ca-

pacities she is hailed as a hero in language normally used of God. Job affirms this celebratory view of creation, as does Ecclesiastes with its language of eating and drinking and joy, which is best understood not as hedonistic but as shalomic.

### Retribution and theodicy

Wisdom’s belief in the order of creation and in its accessibility to the Israelites raises the issue of theodicy (see \*Suffering). If wisdom is the key to a successful life, then how are experiences like Job’s to be explained? There has been considerable discussion about the views of the different wisdom books with respect to retribution. It has often been argued that whereas Proverbs teaches that wisdom leads automatically to blessing and success – that it has what R. C. Van Leeuwen calls an ‘act-consequence’ structure (in *HS* 33, pp. 25–36) – Job and Ecclesiastes pose radical challenges to this naïve view.

Reading Proverbs as a literary whole has shown this interpretation to be too simplistic. Wisdom *does* teach that wise acts generally lead to success and \*blessing. This is clear from Proverbs 1–9, the hermeneutical key to the whole book. However, this general truth is not worked out in every individual case, and in the later chapters the exceptions come more clearly into focus (*cf.* Prov. 15:16; 16:8). Job is the story of such an exception. Job is a thoroughly wise man whose wise acts lead not to blessing but to disaster of the worst sort. In its canonical form, however, the book asserts that this wise man is led ultimately into a deeper knowledge of God through his sufferings and into material blessing.

Ecclesiastes wrestles with the fact that an act-consequence pattern is not evident in every aspect of life. Law courts, for example, are sometimes unjust. If one’s approach to life does not start with the fear of the LORD, one will fail to put these exceptions in the context of God’s purposes and God’s justice and will inevitably conclude that all is \*vanity.

In neither Job nor Ecclesiastes are the authors’ difficulties in understanding what precisely God is doing in the mysteries of life resolved by means of logic alone. In Job the resolution comes through Job’s encountering God existentially as the great Creator. In Ecclesiastes the resolution comes as Qoheleth realizes that trying to discover the meaning of

## Prophetic books

life by reason and experience alone leads one to see everything as enigmatic or absurd, and that this does not do justice to the goodness of life as God has made it. Ecclesiastes concludes by returning to the starting point of the fear of God.

Theologically the wisdom books have much to offer. They are connected with the other types of OT literature through the themes of creation and \*covenant. Covenant, like wisdom, is rooted in creation. The history central to the covenantal literature is part of God's dynamic creation order; different parts of this order come into focus in different types of literature. God's laws reflect how God has made the world. Prophetic literature is based on covenant, and the psalms celebrate creation and God's other great acts, acknowledging that two ways of life are open to worshippers (*cf.* Ps. 1). The OT wisdom writers do not focus on God's acts and laws, but they are aware of them (*cf.* Prov. 2:21-22; 10:30; 22:28; Job 15:18-19; Eccles. 5:1-7).

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## PROPHETIC BOOKS

### Introduction

The classical or 'writing' prophets form a distinct and important part of the OT. It consists of major and minor prophets. The former

group consists of \*Isaiah, \*Jeremiah, \*Lamentations, \*Ezekiel and \*Daniel, and the latter of the twelve books from \*Hosea to \*Malachi. This distinction between major and minor books is based on length and not on significance, and the sequence of the books is largely determined by length and chronology. The longer books (Isaiah, Jeremiah [with Lamentations], Ezekiel and Daniel) come first, and in the best attested sequence are arranged in chronological order from the earliest to the latest. Lamentations follows Jeremiah since Jeremiah was believed to be its author. The minor prophets follow, and are arranged in roughly chronological order, with Hosea being the earliest and Malachi the latest.

### The rise of classical prophecy

The process which produced the prophetic books began in the middle of the 8th century BC and ended some 300 years later. It marked a watershed in the history of \*prophecy. There had previously been significant stories about prophets (1 Sam. 3; 1 Sam. 7-15; 1 Kgs. 13; 1 Kgs. 17-2 Kgs. 13), and these stories contained a few oracles (1 Kgs. 13:2-3; 17:14), but prophetic speeches were not circulated in isolation from their narrative context. Although Samuel, \*Elijah and \*Elisha were prophets of gigantic stature, they did not produce written collections of their sayings. Scholars often make a sharp distinction between these great figures (and their disciples) and the later classical prophets, but it is a false one. Classical prophecy probably evolved naturally from the earlier form. Just as the writing of much of the Torah followed Moses' vision of \*God at Sinai (Exod. 33-34), so classical prophecy began to flourish soon after Elijah's similar experience on the same mountain centuries later (1 Kgs. 19). These two revelatory figures would much later join \*Jesus on a mountain, after which prophecy again flourished and the NT was produced (Matt. 17:1-8).

The emergence of the 'literary' prophets coincides with the destruction of the northern and southern kingdoms of \*Israel and \*Judah and the restoration of the latter. The prophetic books record both the largely unheeded prophetic announcement of divine \*judgment, made to a sinful and self-confident people, and the prediction of \*salvation beyond the judgment, made to a chastened and discouraged people.