

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE



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The Wisdom Books – Study #9

So don't bother correcting mockers;
they will only hate you.
But correct the wise,
and they will love you.
Instruct the wise,
and they will be even wiser.
Teach the righteous,
and they will learn even more.
Proverbs 9:8-9 NLT

Introduction - Ancient Wisdom Speaks to a Modern World

Welcome to the world of the sages, the wise men, the world of poetry, the world of practical realities and instruction for lifestyle.

Hebrew wisdom is a category of literature that is unfamiliar to most modern Christians. Though a significant portion of the Bible is devoted to wisdom writings, Christians often either misunderstand or misapply this material, losing the benefits God intended for them.

When properly understood and used, however, wisdom is a helpful resource for Christian living. When misused, it can be the basis for selfish materialistic, short-sighted behaviour-just the opposite of what God intended. (Fee & Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 187).

The Uniqueness of the Genre

The wisdom literature in the Old Testament is unique in that it has little to no mention of these important biblical themes:

- a. Covenant
- b. Salvation history
- c. Redemption

- d. Exodus
- e. Conquest
- f. Temple and the sacrificial system

The Identity of the Wisdom Material

Job
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Songs
Psalms 1, 19b, 32, 34, 37, 49, 78, 111, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133¹

What is Biblical Wisdom?

"Wisdom is the discipline of applying truth to one's life in the light of experience."²

The central theological essence of biblical wisdom is "The Fear of the Lord."

^{NIV} Job 28:28 And he said to man, 'The fear of the Lord-- that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.'"

^{NIV} Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

^{NIV} Proverbs 9:10-11 "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. ¹¹ For through me your days will be many, and years will be added to your life.

Kaiser states, "When we come to wisdom books and wisdom psalms, the fear of the Lord has become the essence of the knowledge and wisdom of God."³

¹ Walter Kaiser, Jr. *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 215.

² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 187.

³ Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, 169.

Hill and Walton expand upon the definition and explain it this way:⁴

Perhaps we can best capture the biblical way of thinking about all this by thinking in terms of worldview integration. In the ancient world, including Israel, *order* was an important value. Creation brought order to the cosmos; law brought order to society; etiquette brought order to human relationships; politics brought order to governance and authority. Ancient wisdom can then be understood as the pursuit of understanding and preserving order in the world... In Israel, people saw the fear of the Lord as the key to this integration process. Order in the cosmos could only be understood through acknowledgment of the one who brought order. Order could only be preserved in society and in life by understanding God's requirements and expectations.

To say that wisdom is rooted in "the fear of the Lord" is to acknowledge the following truths.⁵

- Wisdom begins with the recognition of who God is.
- God is the source of all wisdom, and wisdom begins by properly aligning ourselves with who he is.
- Proper recognition results in reverence (i.e. the fear of the Lord).
- The practical side of reverence is submission.

The theological notion of the wisdom literature is also rooted in the concept of humility.

^{NIV} Proverbs 11:2 When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.

^{NIV} Proverbs 16:18 Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

Therefore, one of the great barriers to wisdom is pride.

The fear of the Lord in biblical literature becomes the antidote for idolatry.⁶

⁴ John H. Walton and Andrew E. Hill, *Old Testament Today: A Journey from Original Meaning to Contemporary Significance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 290-291.

⁵ Hebrew wisdom literature, as distinguished from the wisdom writings of other cultures, was centered on God. In contrast, Egyptian wisdom, for example, focused on the wisdom of the sages and on disciplining oneself to accept the trials of life.

⁶ Paul E. Koptak, *Proverbs: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 40.

Characteristics of Biblical Wisdom

Ryken gives two basic criteria for categorizing a text as wisdom:⁷

1. The position of the narrator as sage
2. The use of poetic language

The Wisdom literature is classified into two broad categories.

Primary Wisdom Books	Job	Higher Wisdom	Deals with life's big questions. Theme is "God is free" and sovereign over His creation.
	Proverbs	Lower Wisdom	Deals with the daily rhythms of life and the practical considerations that lead to wise living.
	Ecclesiastes	Higher Wisdom	Deals with life's big questions. How to live free for the God who is "above the Sun."
Secondary Wisdom Books	Psalms		Not a book of wisdom yet has wisdom psalms within its collection.
	Song of Songs		Has proverbial lyrics in it. Intended to be a picture of intimate and beautiful sexual relations within marriage.

The forms of wisdom fall into three broad categories:

1. Proverb - A short pithy statement that expresses a truth.
2. Riddle - These tests the mind in order to expose the truth behind a situation. (cf. Prov. 1:6)
3. Essay or Discourse - As seen in the first 9 chapters of Proverbs.

The proverb and essay dominate biblical wisdom literature.

⁷ Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 243.

PARALLELS BETWEEN THE LAW AND WISDOM

<p>Law and wisdom both had secular functions outside of Israel, but are transformed into spiritual concepts in Israel by God's revealed relationship to them.</p>		
<p>SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION: God is source</p>	<p>LAW "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Lev 19:2).</p>	<p>WISDOM "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Pr 9:10).</p>
<p>MOTIVATION: Only a God-centered perspective gives ultimate value.</p>	<p>Not just so that society runs smoothly, but so that we will do what is right.</p>	<p>Not pursued for personal fulfillment, but so that we become people of faith.</p>
<p>FOCUS OF GOD'S SELF-REVELATION</p>	<p>God is characterized by absolute morality.</p>	<p>God is characterized by unfathomable wisdom.</p>

Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament, p. 25

The Practical Components of the Wisdom Literature

The "fear of the Lord" leads to success, prosperity, and skillful living. This is due to the following:

1. It leads to an avoidance and hatred of evil, leading to a life of moral and ethical uprightness (Psalm 34:11-14; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3; 28:28; Prov. 3:7; 10:27; 14:2, 26; 16:6, 17; 19:23; 22:4).
2. To fear the Lord keeps in proper perspective the relationship of the material and present versus the spiritual and eternal (Ecc. 1:3-11; 3:14; 12:13).
3. To fear the Lord keeps a person living in sincerity, honesty, and truthfulness (Ecc. 5:1-7).

The "fear of the Lord" is the basis for a life of blessing from God. Life is viewed here as both qualitative and quantitative. A life of wisdom did not mean just existence. It meant a life of success, well-being, blessing, and fulfillment.

The wisdom material borrows from the themes of Leviticus and Deuteronomy which declare that if a child of God keeps the statutes of God, they will live! (Lev. 18:5; Deut. 8:1, 3; 30:15, 19-20)

There are a number of metaphors for "life" in the wisdom literature:

1. The path of life (Prov. 2:19; 5:6; 10:17; 15:24)
 2. The fountain of life (Prov 13:14)
 3. The tree of life (Prov. 3:18; 11:30; 15:4)
- The "fear of the Lord" also leads to an integration of life and truth. This is the primary theological notion of Ecclesiastes.
 - It is through the Lord that humanity learns appropriate values and priorities for life. Outside of God everything is "vanity." Humanity is dependent upon the Creator, and values must come from God who lives "above the sun," rather than the creation that is "under the sun."
 - The "fear of the Lord" leads to a proper understanding of happiness and well-being.
 - The wisdom teachers pointed to the practicalities of due reward intrinsic in the natural order of things. Two examples are hard work (Prov. 10:4) and moral uprightness (Prov. 11:6). These were even seen outside the covenant promises of blessing for those who were obedient.
 - This is not to promote the idea that all hard work and moral good was rewarded with health, wealth, and happiness because God gives no guarantees since His purposes must prevail (Job; Psalm 73; Ecc. 6:1-12; 7:1-15).
 - So, the sages taught the values of moral and ethical uprightness, diligent work, and godly relationships as an end in and of themselves. Whatever blessings came into the life of a believer were purely considered to be gifts from God, meant to be enjoyed by the godly.
 - Blessings included the gifts of food, drink, fun, relationships, marriage, and sexual intimacy based on love and fidelity (Prov. 5:18; Ecc. 2:24; 3:13; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; Song of Songs 4:12, 15; 8:6-7).
 - Lastly, according to wisdom, what was the ultimate good in life? (Note: Job 14:7, 14; 19:23-27; Ecc. 3:17, 21-22; 11:9-10; 12:14). Namely, to fare well on the judgment day! (cf. Psalm 1:6).