**Reading the Bible Again…For the First Time**

**(Hermeneutics: The Science and Art of Biblical Interpretation)**

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**LESSON FIVE: The Wisdom Literature of the Bible**

**Introduction:**

1. What is wisdom?

\* The Hebrew term for wisdom (*hokmah*) occurs about 318 times in the OT, 183 of which are in Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes..

The term *hokmah* means “skill”

Technical skill

Describes artisan guilds

**Mariners** at “wit’s end” (skill not there!! Jewish Bible, “all their skill swallowed itself”)

**Temple artisans**

**Intellectual skill**. Describes worldview applied (Deut 4:6 in context)

**Wisdom is “skillful living,” “wisdom is the skillful negotiation of life”**  (JL). Therefore, wisdom is the skillful application of a biblical worldview to the questions and issues of life. Read Prov 4, note v. 11. Read Ps 49. Joshua was a skillful leader (Deut 34:9).

\* In our culture, “wisdom” is often thought of as the extension or result of knowledge. But in the Bible, wisdom **is** knowledge, it is understanding (cf. Pro 9:10; Ps 49:3…note parallelism with “understanding”). ***Wisdom is a way of life which proceeds from a view of life.***  In this sense, it is connected to “knowledge” but not the simplistic Western culture idea. Thus, biblical wisdom is imaged as a part of age (experience):

"Wisdom is with the aged" (Job 12:12; Pro 16:31)

\* Wisdom is the skill to make godly choices in life **on the basis of knowing a biblical worldview**. Wisdom is a "matter of orientation to God’s self-revelation, out of which comes the ability to please him". Interestingly, the formal wisdom literature in the Bible **NEVER** quotes the “Law” but reflects how to live by its influence in a sinful world. It NEVER appeals to the Law-Knowledge base but rather to the knowledge/wisdom drawn from creation, nature, and the many “observable” parts of our world; a world ordered by Yahweh.

2. OT wisdom literature dominates Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and Job. It is also found in many other places, e.g. the Psalms (about a dozen, 1, 19:7-14, 34, 37, 49, 73...) and Song of Solomon. The extra-biblical books of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and Wisdom of Solomon are highly prized as Jewish wisdom literature.

3. "Wisdom literature then, tends, to focus on people and their behavior, how successful they are at making godly\* choices and whether or not they are learning how to apply God's truth to the experiences they have" (Fee and Stuart, 208).

\*is this term appropriate here? Our culture uses it, yea manipulatively, as a code word.

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**I. Wisdom is a Type of Literature Which is Usually Expressed Through the Conventions of Poetry.**

A. Parallelism is present.

Synonymous (Pro 7:4)

Antithetical (Pro 10:1)

B. Acrostics (Alphabetic, Pro 31:10-31)

C. Alliteration (Ecc 3:1-8)

D. Similes and Metaphors (Job 32:19; Ecc 12:1-8; SoS 4:1-6)

1. Personification (Wisdom = She)

**II. Wisdom Literature is subject driven**.

A. Ecclesiastes = cynical, actually realistic wisdom

B. Proverbs = practical living wisdom

1. Job = philosophical-theological reflection on life

**III. Salient Characteristics of Wisdom Literature**

A. The proverb

1. Proverbial statements are as old as written history. “A proverb is a short, pithy saying that expresses a wise, general truth concerning life.”

"Like mother, like daughter" (Ezek 16:44)

"Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness” (1 Sam 24:13)

A stitch in time saves nine.

Birds of a feather flock together.

2. Are biblical proverbs promises or hopeful dictums?

1a. Sometimes the answer depends on your continuum of time--this life or the next?

Prov 22:22-23, God eventually calls the oppressor to answer.

2a. Usually proverbs are just life observations which “normally” apply when people live certain patterns.

Prov 10:4, "Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.” Guaranteed? NO!

3a. Proverbs are normally ***not*** promises or universal laws which guarantee the stated outcome. **They are observations about life which provide a higher degree of probability of success if the assumed “rules” are followed**. (See Stein's examples, *Playing by the Rules* [Baker, 1994], 83-87).

Proverbs 22:6 “Train up a child...” — But not all children do, even when it seems that parents have done a reasonable job of mentoring their children in life.

Proverbs 1:33 “but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm.” — But what about believers who suffer and even die for their faithfulness to God? What about John the Baptizer?

Proverbs 3:9-10 “Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.” — Did OT tithing insure farmers of success? What about the poor widow Jesus notes?

Proverbs 10:3-4 “The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry but he thwarts the craving of the wicked. Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.”

— But is all poverty due to laziness?

Gospel texts that call for “abandonment,” and “dispossession” are usually proverbial and even cultural (and certainly confined within the immediate context as the later Epistles would reflect by the absence of the same “calls” as models of ministry.)

Matthew 26:52 “For all who draw the sword will die by the sword.”

— But some mercenaries have done quite well!

B. Wisdom literature has a striking absence of narrative elements which uniquely characterize Israel’s history (e.g. promises to patriarchs, the exodus, the Sinai covenant). Wisdom focuses on ethics, “how to live”. It’s focus is on the functional side of life.

C. Wisdom is religious, although it is often related to the practical aspects of just living life. The Hebrew mind, however, did not function with a dichotomy of sacred and secular. To live life was to live under God’s economy.

Biblical wisdom is more a matter of ethics than philosophical reflection. The Hebrew person is certainly reflective, but not in a "pigeon hole" way. It is a perspective which views all of life as ultimately related to God, and therefore wholistic not partitioned.

D. Wisdom literature views all of life in theological terms, that is, religious instruction incorporates all of life. **There is no sacred and secular in wisdom literature— every aspect of living is sacred duty. The Hebrew mind was whole not compartmentalized (as in our culture).**

1. Worldview themes of Old Testament theology (see *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4.924ff.)

1a. Creation (especially drawing on analogies from nature with the presupposition that God is behind it)

2a. Experiencing God

Wisdom engages an element of mystery about God himself (an engagement not as strikingly noted in narrative). He is known (imminent) but unknowable (transcendent).

Job 11:7-8

Job 36:22-26

This particularly relates to the pervasive sense of dependence on God. Wisdom also incorporates "thinking out loud" about the good and the seeming contradictions of life for the godly (cf. Ecclesiastes).

Experiencing God’s will **is tied** to God’s instructions rather than a mystical experience.

Proverbs 3:5-6

3a. Ethics (cf. the Gospels, James)

4a. Divine realism [Skepticism] (Book of Ecc)

5a. Immortality (Job)

2. Wisdom literature provided Israel with a pool of practical directions for the variety of life's situations (cf. Osborne, 192).

1a. Etiquette and speech (Pro 29:20)

2a. Self-control (Pro 25:28)

3a. Family relationships (Pro 10:1)

4a. Material wealth (this subject, as some others--e.g. wine--show two sides of life. It is important that the interpreter identify the context and also maintain the more wholistic balance of all references)

Pro 11:4 (neg)

Pro 10:22 (pos)

5a. Why the righteous suffer (Job)

6a. The seeming contradictions--the evil prosper (Ps 49; Ps 73)

**IV. Review observations**….

A. Wisdom literature is extremely valuable because it makes religion immediately relevant.

1. Wisdom literature is usually self-evident and direct in its statements (allowing for figures of speech). It is, therefore, also transcultural.

C. Wisdom literature will be abused if treated as law or promise rather than pattern.

D. Wisdom literature has a **vulnerable** **honesty about God, ourselves, and life.**

**V. Wisdom Genre in the New Testament**.

A. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

1. The **direct use** of OT Wisdom books in the NT (UBS4 base).

Proverbs 3:11-12 Hebrews 12:5-6

3:34 James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5

11:31 1 Peter 4:18

25:21-22 Romans 12:20

26:11 2 Peter 2:22

Job 5:13 1 Corinthians 3:19

41:11 Romans 11:35

Ecclesiastes … none

2. **“Allusions and Verbal Parallels**” to OT Wisdom books (UBS4 base).

Proverbs 2:3-6 James 1:5

2:4 Matthew 13:44

3:4 Luke 2:52

10:12 James 5:20

15:29 John 9:31

18:4 John 7:38

19:17 Matthew 25:40

24:12 Matthew 16:27; Luke 16:15

25:6-7 Luke 14:8-10

25:21 Matthew 5:44

27:1 James 4:13-14

29:3 Luke 15:13

29:23 Matthew 23:12

31:17 Luke 12:35

Job 1:20 Matthew 26:65

2:12 Matthew 26:65

5:11 Luke 1:52; James 4:10

12:19 Luke 1:52

19:26-27 John 19:30

22:29 Matthew 23:12

34:19 James 2:1

38:3 Luke 12:35

38:17 Matthew 16:18

39:30 Luke 17:37

40:7 Luke 12:35

42:2 Matthew 19:26; Mark 10:27

Ecclesiastes 1:2 Romans 8:20

5:15 1 Timothy 6:7

7:9 James 1:19

7:20 Romans 3:10-12

11:5 John 3:8

12:14 2 Corinthians 5:10

3. Observations based on these parallels:

1a. The use of OT Wisdom texts in the NT is much less than other sections of the OT.

2a. The direct use of Wisdom texts is surprisingly low, especially in James and the Gospels where wisdom genre seems most prevalent. In fact, there are NO direct uses of the big three OT Wisdom books in the Gospels!!

3a. When the usage pattern is expanded to “allusions and verbal parallels,” the presence of OT Wisdom texts expands only modestly. The problem of this category is whether the author uses this material consciously or unconsciously.

4a. Studies on wisdom in the NT by quotation are rare. Forms and themes are treated *in.loc.*

B. WISDOM FORMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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| LAWLOR’S LIST OF CHARACTERISTICS OF OLD TESTAMENT WISDOM | WISDOM CHARACTERISTICS IN THE EPISTLE OF JAMES |
| Advocates the necessity of acquiring wisdom, but recognizes the difficulty of finding it. | 1:5ff.; 3:13-18 |
| Operates on the basis of belief in an “established order.” | 1:3; 1:9-11; 1:15; Ch. 3; 4:13-15; |
| Reflects a deep interest in interpersonal relationships | 2:1ff.; Ch. 3; Ch. 4; Ch. 5 |
| Evidences a constant awareness of the transiency of life | 1:11; |
| Carries a heavy emphasis on hearing and doing | 1:22-25; 1:26-27; |
| Use of the Rich / Poor continuum (gm) | 2:1ff.; 3:13-4:6 (cf. Prov 3:19-35); 5:20 (cf. Prov 10:12); 5:1ff.; |

There are additional characteristics with general similarities to OT Wisdom characteristics and some additions. For example:

* Obedience to God’s law … but law not referenced in OT wisdom! (Sermon on the Mount; James 2; 4:12)
* A way of life opposed to other ways (SM; James 1) … Two Ways
* A way of thinking that proceeds from an understanding (Paul, “think on these things” followed by moral and behavior instructions)
* Belief in an established order (James 1; 3)
* Transitory nature of life (James 4:13-16)
* Hearing and doing motif (Matt. 7:24-27; James 1:22-23)

An additional project would be to compare OT *hokmah* with NT sofia.

**Two items in the NT stand out as related to the Wisdom genre.**

1. **The Sermon on the Mount** (Matt. 5-7; Luke 6; Cf. Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding*. Waco: Word Books, 1982)

The SM is one of the most prominent examples of wisdom form in the New Testament. Besides numerous aphoristic statements, the specific form known as “Beatitudes” (makarios, “Blessed”) especially reflects wisdom form and theme. This form extends beyond the SM. There are 44 beatitudes in the NT (ibid., 63):

Matthew 5:5, 6, 7, 8, 10; 16:17

Luke 1:45; 11:27, 28; 12:37, 38; 14:14, 15; 23:29

M&L parallels Matt 5:3, 4, 6, 11-12; with Luke 6:20; 21, 22, 11:6; Luke 7:23; 13:16; Luke 10:23; 24:46; Luke 12:43

John 13:17; 20:29

Romans 4:7, 8; 14:22

James 1:12, 25

1 Peter 3:14; 4:14

Revelation 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14

Beatitude forms existed prior to the NT in both Greek and Jewish literature. In classical Greek, “the content generally reflected the Greek philosophy of life by referring to internal and external conditions, such as material wealth or honor, that assure one of happiness” (ibid., 63).

Guelich sites 45 occurrences of beatitude form in the Old Testament, occurring mostly in the Psalms and Wisdom books. These statements are aphoristic observations about the “well being” of life:

Life itself Proverbs 8:34

Security Psalm 40:4

Deliverance Psalm 2:11

Military success Deuteronomy 33:29

Prosperity Psalm 1:2

Posterity Psalm 127:5

Help, justice and abundance of food Psalm 146:5-7

The Jewish use of beatitude type statements continues in its non-canonical Wisdom literature (e.g. Wisdom of Solomon 1:6; 7:15; 7:15-30; Sirach 1:1, 14, 26; 19:20; 24:1-34; Tobit; 2 Baruch; Psalms of Solomon; 1 Enoch).

2. **The Epistle of James** (see below)

If Wisdom is the skillful negotiation of life, then James is the most wisdom oriented book in the NT. In James, wisdom is necessary (1:5-8; 3:13-18; cf. 1:16-18) to negotiate

Trials and temptation (Js 1)

Suffering

Status in life (esp. rich/poor sections)

Prayer (Js 1; 5)

Speech (Js 3)

The nature of salvation in the real world

Inter-personal relationships (throughout, Js 4)

Life planning

1a. Wisdom for dealing with trials and temptation: Unpacking James 1

James 1 has three major movements that portray dealing with T&T:

Responding to Inevitable Trials (1:1-12)

Identifying the True Origin of Temptation (1:13-17)

Pursuing the Antidotes to Trials and Temptation (1:18-27)

2a. Wisdom for relationships with man and God: Unpacking James 2; 4; 5

3a. Wisdom for dealing with the tongue/speech: Unpacking James 3

Helpful bibliography:

Davids, Peter H. *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982.

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Wall, Robert W. *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James*. Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997.

C. WISDOM THEMES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. In the NT, wisdom recognizes the superiority of a divine perspective over a purely secular one (cf. 1 Cor 1-4). Presupposing God and accepting his self-disclosure is supposed to flavor all of our thinking.

2. Meditation on what is true is a means to make us the kind of people God wants us to be (Col 3:1- 4; Phil 2:1-4).

3. Wisdom is moral application as a product of the definition of correct understanding (Col 1:9; 3:16). Skillful living in the NT is moral development that results in appropriate application of truth to all of life’s situations (from preferring others over yourself to household codes).

4. The Wisdom motif of critical self-reflection is present in Romans 7.

5. Wisdom as an interpreter of our world and its relationship to God is present in Jesus’ use of the world around him interpreted through divine principles. James draws many illustrations from the world around him to make his points (1:6 sea; 1:11 grass; 1:23 mirror; 3:3 horses; 3:4 ships; 3:5- 6 fire; 3:7 animal world; 3:11-12 water and trees). Is it not interesting that wisdom looks to the world rather than a verse or bible story to unpack life.

6. Wisdom views the world from a deterministic view of history (cf. Rev).

7. The “two paths” of Proverbs 4:10-19 is reflected in Jesus’ description of the “two ways/roads” (Matt 7:13-14).

8. Parables are a form of wisdom genre.

9. The Epistle of James particularly looks at life through the lens of “wisdom.” Skillful living is the key to survival and pleasing God.

Ch 1 Trials/Temptations; Do the walk

Ch 2 Favoritism & Law; Functional righteousness

Ch 3 Tongue & Wisdom

3:13-18 summary text on “Who is wise….”

Ch 3 moves from Created order to natural law to spiritual law.

Ch 4 Relational breakdowns; View of the future

Ch 5 Rich and Poor; Patience and Prayer

10. New Testament Christological hymns (cf. Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20) may be based in wisdom genre (see Jack T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background*. Cambridge University Press, 1971).

CONCLUSION

In the New Testament, wisdom genre is integrated into sections that reflect higher levels of compositional continuity with the Old Testament (e.g. Gospels; James) rather than being set in their own section as the OT.

Wisdom as the “skillful negotiation of life” is innately present in all of the moral instructions of the NT, whether packaged in Beatitudes, aphoristic statements, parables, behavioral lists (virtue and vice), household codes, or in observations about godly living drawn from the world around us.