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Wisdom in the Old Testament

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Wisdom in the Old Testament

Katharine Dell

This article takes a thematic approach to commonalities between the three main wisdom books in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (OT/HB; sections 1–3), and then looks briefly at apocryphal and New Testament (NT) developments (section 4). The first section covers the acquisition of wisdom; its function as teaching and character formation through proverbs, instructions, and pre-scientific listing of phenomena; the beneficial goals to be gained by adherence to wisdom in relation to life and death issues; and the importance of communication as individuals and within community. The second section looks at the divine aspect of the wisdom quest, with God as creator, and the place of woman Wisdom and wisdom's moral code of retributive justice. The third section considers the challenge to traditional wisdom perspectives and to faith in God posed by more questioning wisdom books, looking at the way individual experience contradicts traditional ideas and how retributive justice is overturned. Notions of 'the good life', how life is relativized in the light of death and how faith in God is maintained in the face of human suffering are explored. In section 4, the wise sayings of the apocryphal wisdom books are considered, as well as the interrelationship between divine Wisdom and the Logos of John's Gospel in the NT. The issue of hidden sayings and belief in the afterlife are also considered. These themes all relate back to early themes from the wisdom books of the OT/HB. The conclusion focuses on contemporary relevance for the modern believer.

Keywords: Bible, Wisdom, Proverbs, Knowledge, Torah, God as creator, Justice, Good life, Worldview

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1 Introduction

The quality of being ‘wise’ is elusive, and something that human beings need to learn throughout life. Even those already considered wise should ‘hear and gain in learning’ (Prov 1:5; Schipper 2019). The formative period of youth however is the key stage for such learning, so as to become a responsible adult (Prov 1:4), equipped to make good decisions, to live within a civilized society, and to respond well to others through various types of relationship, individually and in community. Indeed, it goes beyond human relationships to include relationship with God, as well as with the created world of plants and animals (Job 12:7–8; see recent environmentally-motivated studies, e.g. Dell 2010; Habel 2014). Becoming wise is about navigating life and its highs and lows, and being equipped to react in difficult situations such as personal suffering and illness (see recently Southwood 2021 on the significance of Job’s illness). It is also about seeking to understand the complexity of relationships and encounters of all types through experience – one’s own and that of others, notably through the sum of gathered experience passed down by those wise men and women who have trodden life’s path before us.

Within the Rabbinic and Protestant biblical canon there are three books that have commonly been designated as ‘wisdom literature’: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. If one follows a broader Catholic canon, two further books would be included – Ben Sira (also known as Ecclesiasticus) and the Wisdom of Solomon. Whilst these five books may contain more wisdom than others, it is widely recognized that wisdom influence extends into many biblical books, within and beyond those books collectively known as ‘the Writings’ (Morgan 1981). For example, some psalms have been designated ‘wisdom’ on grounds of genre and similarity with the three ‘wisdom’ books (e.g. Ps 49; 73; Gillingham 2016), and some characters such as Joseph and Daniel have been seen to epitomize the wise person who has successfully navigated the choices on offer through the wisdom quest (on Joseph, see Von Rad 1984; on Daniel and mantic wisdom – a variety of wisdom related to astrology and astrology – see Müller 1969).

Furthermore, whilst ‘wisdom literature’ is a helpful designation, it has been questioned as a category for grouping specific books together in recent times (see Kynes 2019). Alternative groupings have been suggested, such as a ‘Solomonic’ collection which would include those books attributed to wisdom’s most famous sponsor, King Solomon (see Dell 2020b). This would bring Song of Songs into the frame (see Murphy 1990) and would possibly take Job out. It might also lead to consideration of 1 Kings 1–11 as the main Solomon narrative within the Old Testament (Brueggemann 2005). Further alternative groupings might be found depending on one’s criteria, which highlights the subjective nature of such categorizing decisions (Sneed 2015).

For the purposes of this article, the central ‘wisdom literature’ will be seen to consist of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes within the Old Testament, Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon in the Apocrypha (or wider Roman Catholic canon), and other texts that are clearly influenced by the same underlying worldview (as according to traditional scholarly overviews of ‘wisdom literature’, such as in introductory textbooks, e.g. Crenshaw 2010). This entry will also explore how some of these texts prepare the ground for a wisdom outlook in the New Testament. Whether Jesus himself was one of the ‘wise’ of his day, demonstrating wisdom techniques in his sayings and approach to life, and whether the writers of the New Testament echo the wisdom tradition in their presentation of material, would be the key questions in this related area (for an overview, see Witherington 1994).

There are two basic types of knowledge pursued in circles of the wise. One is an attempt to understand the world on an objective level, a kind of pre-scientific quest to discover patterns in the world, to explore the wonders of sun, moon, constellations, and the elements, and on earth to examine the workings of not only human beings but also animals and nature in all its diversity (as exemplified in Job 28; 38–41). The second type of knowledge sought is more subjective: that of human experience which builds up a wealth of information over many generations. This type of wisdom seeks predominantly to understand human behaviour, motivation, and relationships, but also relationships with God and the created world (as found particularly in the proverbial material of Proverbs and Ben Sira). The limitations of the quest for knowledge of both types is acknowledged in the conclusion that ‘[t]he fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge’ (Prov 1:7). God is the ultimate source of knowledge, and relationship with God is the key to any attempt at true understanding (Boström 1990; Longman 2017). As the Psalmist says: ‘Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it’ (Ps 139:6).

However, this does not deter the wise of ancient Israel from the attempt to order and categorize the world and to seek to understand its complexities. They observed the world around them and needed to make sense of it. The basic forms of doing so were the coining of proverbs, the composing of poems, small vignettes of narrative or parable, and grander poetic imagery of wisdom personified or of lengthy description of God’s creative acts. There were also the forms of dialogues, to air ethical issues; hymns and prayers to praise the creator or ask for good outcomes; and personal testimonies to life and faith, particularly in the later stages of the development of the literature. There was a key moral aspect to this wisdom quest, in that it is the wise, good, and morally upright who are seen to make the right kinds of choices, whilst the foolish or lazy get it wrong. The wisdom books all use a set of binary oppositions between wise/foolish; righteous/wicked; wealthy/poor; industrious/lazy, and so on, to highlight extreme character types through which to illustrate human behaviour (see Brown 1996 on character formation in Proverbs). The wise person will try to navigate a path between these extremes that will enable them to lead a

more normalized and balanced life (Prov 12:28). Even when good and wise people suffer extreme situations – such as Job at his worst moments of bereavement and illness – such a moral lantern lights up their path to seek understanding of God's purposes in these dark hours (Dell 2016). Even when life seems topsy-turvy and reward elusive, wisdom is still a reliable guide and there is always human enjoyment of life to fall back upon (an emphasis found in both Ecclesiastes and Wisdom of Solomon).

Just as this material was formed, read, and shaped in ancient communities, so it also speaks to modern day communities. There is a timeless universalism about the wisdom material that makes it accessible and applicable in modern life. The pre-scientific quest to understand the world has many resonances in a highly scientifically sophisticated world, with a basic attempt to quantify and evaluate the world in an objective way being a key concern (e.g. in both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes an interest in numerical heightening and much comparison in 'better x than y' sayings). The appreciation of the created world and interest in animals and nature – as demonstrated in Job through God's description of the world that he has made, with its major emphasis on animals (Job 38–41) – has strong connections to contemporary environmental and ecological concerns. Finally, the quest to understand human psychology in relationships and experiences, as found in the proverbial material of both Proverbs and Ben Sira, is very much in tune with modern interest in human nature and self-fulfilment. In these ways, these particular scriptures speak powerfully to our modern context. The wider issues of human suffering and belief in an apparently indifferent God, and attempts to understand the purpose of life in an existential context (as found in Job and Ecclesiastes), also have a considerable popular appeal.

2 The acquisition of Wisdom

2.1 Setting in life (*Sitz im Leben*)

A preliminary question arises regarding the nature of 'the wise' who are circulating, collecting, and ultimately writing down this material, and the books that we have inherited through the processes of oral and written transmission (Niditch 1997). What was their 'setting in life' (or *Sitz im Leben* as it is known in the scholarship)? There are hints in the wider canon of a group of 'the wise' (Jer 18:18) who existed alongside other groups of priests and prophets, but in a relatively small ancient society it is unclear whether these roles would have been mutually exclusive. A likely scenario is that the royal court during the time of the monarchy could have supported such a group, who would have been the literati of their day, with roles of archiving and producing written documents, preserving historical data, and performing administrative roles, as in parallel cultures such as ancient Egypt and Sumer (Heaton 1974). However, their prime task would have been teaching the next generation of those professional wise ones who would take their place as leaders in society in generations to come. This would probably have necessitated some kind of

court school – whether this was part of a wider school network or not is a source of debate (Lemaire 1981). In later times, after the structures of the royal court had disappeared, the temple may have provided a central point for different groups to exist (e.g. Doll 1985 who argued for temple schools where people would have done religious and administrative training). There would also have been wider administrative structures (linked to similar structures across the Hellenistic world; see Collins 1997), but wisdom books also seem to take on a more individual nature as the teaching of a particular sage (notably Ecclesiastes and Ben Sira, as indicated by their prologues that attribute the works).

Within the book of Proverbs, some of the proverbs indicate a court setting: for example, those about how to behave in front of a king (e.g. Prov 14:35; Humphreys 1978). Yet there are many proverbs that indicate family, tribal, and other relationships, and that may well have been a store of oral tradition built up over many generations and only finally written down as books were reaching their final form. As well as being a likely process for the coming-together of the book of Proverbs, this may also be true for Ecclesiastes, who uses traditional proverbial material in order to fuel his discussions about the worth and worthlessness of life in the light of death, the great leveller (Whybray 1989).

There is little doubt that the proverbial form would have been used within the communities of ancient Israel over many generations, only reaching a fixed literary form at a later stage – that of the scribes or authors of these books. Whilst Proverbs is more of a collection of separate sections, each with a different character and with a preface in 1–9 to introduce the material (Dell 2006), Job is more of a two-stage book, with an original prose story that might have circulated before the main sections of dialogues and God speeches were added after the exile (Clines 1989). Ecclesiastes, in turn, has the character of having been penned by one author, possibly also citing proverbial material (so Gordis 1939); and yet there is an intriguing epilogue that speaks of the teacher Qoheleth in the third person, and there is a possible layering of speakers here too. Ben Sira also forms a collection of proverbial material, like Proverbs, but with the voice of the author also present (Harvey 1993). The Wisdom of Solomon reads more like an individual theological reflection (Crenshaw 2010), although in both books separate poems or shorter collections of material may have existed before their placement in those texts.

2.2 Didacticism

The major function of the wisdom books is to teach. This teaching is from experience – not just the personal experience of the teacher themselves but the wider experience of many generations of teachers. The ‘father/son’ teaching model is used in Proverbs and Ben Sira; the book of Job uses dialogue to express differing opinions and speaks even of the animals having something to ‘teach’ us (Job 12); and Ecclesiastes is described in the epilogue as a ‘teacher’ who instructed many. The prologue to the book of Proverbs

opens with the purpose of teaching wisdom, providing a good summary for the would-be wise person. It mentions 'learning about wisdom and instruction' as the primary aim, with the goal of 'understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity' (Prov 1:2–3a). These are high ideals, but they are the goals of a successful teacher. Through the observations of many proverbs, these higher aspirations will be fulfilled that will develop the individual and the community. The passage goes on to identify different characters within society – the simple, the young, the wise, and the discerning. They all have qualities to learn and skills to perfect. The wise are enjoined to 'gain in learning', suggesting that learning is lifelong and that, although one might already be wise, there is always more to know and understand. In Prov 1:6, 'a proverb and a figure [...] words and riddles' are on the curriculum – this wisdom is hard to tease out and will demand the pupil's full attention. The climax comes in verse 7, bringing in the divine dimension but also the moral one too: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction'. It is those who are wise and pious who can truly begin to understand, even though God is the only one who ultimately knows everything, whereas the fool does not even acknowledge the starting point of the need to study wisdom and apply oneself to instruction.

As already mentioned, this teaching relates to two types of knowledge acquisition, the first being straightforward objective knowledge about the way humans and the world work and the second being more subjective insights into human nature and relationships with the divine and the natural world. The quest for objective knowledge leads to a wisdom that makes people who study it very knowledgeable about the designs of the creator God, the role of humans, and the way natural processes work in the world. This is a pre-scientific era of enquiry, but it is the closest thing in the Bible to an attempt to order the world, through listing and counting phenomena and through prolonged observation of the ways of animals and human beings. The more subjective quest is linked more closely to moral behaviour and the realization that there are profitable paths along which to walk, which contrast with more difficult paths that need to be navigated more carefully.

Path imagery is particularly strong in Proverbs. For instance: 'Therefore walk in the way of the good and keep to the paths of the just' (Prov 2:20) but '[d]o not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evildoers' (Prov 4:14). The path of goodness leads to the light and ultimately to divine blessing; the path of the wicked is the way of immorality and death (cf. Sir 32:20–22). This binary paradigm is challenged in other books, although the paths of good and wicked are widely acknowledged. Job, for example, in the frustration of suffering and pain, says of God that '[h]e has walled up my way so that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths' (Job 19:8). The usual pattern appears to have been overturned by God. The Wisdom of Solomon speaks of Wisdom saving those whose paths went astray: 'And thus the paths of those on earth were set right, and people were

taught what pleases you, and were saved by wisdom' (Wis 9:18). Ben Sira writes that 'the fear of the Lord is their [the wise's] path' (Sir 50:29).

Teaching requires technique – the manner in which teaching is done is key. In Proverbs and Ben Sira, the proverb is the predominant mode of teaching, whereby a whole range of topics are covered and there is room for contradiction, ambiguity, and readerly response even among seemingly simple observations about life (see [section 1.2](#)). One technique used is numerical heightening, where different images are ranged together in order to present a compendium of likeness, to challenge the reader into making connections that they would not normally have made. A key example is Prov 30:7–31 which has various lists of phenomena, paralleled in ancient Egyptian onomastica or lists, often using numbering systems. Lists were seen as vital for seeking to impose order on what might otherwise appear chaotic. Prov 30:18–19, for example, lists two animals and then an inanimate object, and culminates with an observation on humans in comparative mode:

Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand; the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a girl.

The numbers and catchword of 'way' link the unit in a rhetorical flourish, but the aligning of unlike things and their essential characteristics culminates in the mention of human relationship – all are equally wondrous and incomprehensible for this wise person who simply aligns them and leaves the reader guessing what is meant.

Similar formulations are found in Job 39–40, with the listing of different (mainly wild) types of animals by God, in the context of describing the wonder of his creative acts and the care he takes of every living creature. A diverse collection of animals is chosen – from the ostrich to the horse – to illustrate the point that they each have their own distinctive ways and are even far off from human habitation and experience in many cases, and yet God cares for them, sustains them, and rejoices their diverse existence.

A similar phenomenon is found in Eccl 3:1–8 in the poem on time. Here all the activities that are listed are human, and yet the poem brings together a string of random and unrelated activities that humans might (and do) do within the context of a life span bounded by 'a time to be born, and a time to die' (3:2). They are a string of oppositional pairs – e.g. kill/heal; break down/build up; weep/laugh – representing in their scope a whole range of human activity and emotion. This poem represents the didactic range of the wise, who use mainly proverbs but often include small vignettes of narrative or poetry to illustrate their points. The intention is didactic at its heart: the would-be-wise reader needs to listen and take note. Ben Sira produces lists too – for example of Israel's

ancestors, in a list of famous men of the past which is also a poem in praise of them (e.g. the listing of trades in Sir 38:24–39:11 and of the wonders of nature in Sir 38:24–39:11), and didacticism is explored in poems about wisdom and its nature (Sir 1:1–20; 4:11–19). The Wisdom of Solomon lists, in a more abstract mode, the kinds of qualities with which Wisdom is endowed (e.g. Wis 14:22–31).

2.3 The nature of the Proverb and instruction genres

A proverb is essentially a pithy saying, and there are some ‘one-liners’ that are essentially statements of fact with no comparative element, such as Prov 20:14: “Bad, bad”, says the buyer; but then goes away and boasts’. However, the predominant form of proverbs is a two-line saying using parallelism. Parallelism has been called the most fundamental characteristic of all Hebrew poetry. Since the eighteenth century, from the time of Robert Lowth who wrote *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1758, in Latin), it has been established that parallelism is fundamental to Hebrew verse. As Andersen wrote, ‘the most fundamental characteristic of Hebrew poetry is the preference for that certain type of information structure expressed by parallelism’ (Andersen 1986: 81).

It is a phenomenon which goes far beyond its use in Proverbs, providing a point of connection between these sayings and their counterparts in longer sections of poetry elsewhere in Hebrew poetry. Parallelism involves coordinated lines of the same length within a sentence or sentence group. There are different types of parallelism. The first is synonymous or synthetic parallelism, i.e. A=B where the second half of the sentence essentially says the same as the first. For example: ‘Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler’ (Prov 20:1a). Another example is: ‘The evil have no future; the lamp of the wicked will go out’ (Prov 24:20). Imagery often enriches the proverbs, as in this example with the lamp and the metaphorical use of wine and strong drink in the former. The lengths of these proverbs can vary. A pithy, example is Prov 4:5a: ‘Get wisdom, get insight’. Others are more elaborate:

Can fire be carried in the bosom without burning one’s clothes? Or can one walk on hot coals without scorching the feet? So is he who sleeps with his neighbour’s wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished. (Prov 6:27–28)

In this longer example, the two parallel lines are partnered by a third line that gives a moral punch at the end of the sentence.

A second kind of parallelism is alternating or antithetical parallelism, where the second line contrasts with the first (i.e. B contrasts with A). For example, Prov 11:18: ‘The wicked earn no real gain, but those who sow righteousness get a true reward’; or Prov 12:27: ‘The lazy do not roast their game, but the diligent obtain precious wealth’. Again, the motif can be

repeated over a number of lines, e.g. the comparison in Prov 17:3 between silver and gold, followed by a contrast: 'The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold,/but the LORD tests the heart'.

There are some proverbs in which the consequence of an action is pointed out, making them more like exhortations than simple observations. For example: 'My child, fear the LORD and the king, and do not disobey either of them; for disaster comes from them suddenly and who knows the ruin that both can bring?' (Prov 24:21–22). Some proverbs are almost commands, such as Prov 14:7: 'Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not find words of knowledge'. These can be accompanied by their opposite – antithetical commands: 'Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man and he will love you' (Prov 9:8 RSV). In these proverbs, many similes occur; these can be identified by the use of 'like' or 'as': 'As a door turns on its hinges, so does a lazy person in bed' (Prov 26:14). Metaphors are also common: 'The way of the lazy is overgrown with thorns, but the path of the upright is a level highway' (Prov 15:19). One also finds numerical proverbs, such as Prov 30:18–19 cited above. There is both repetition and contradiction in the formulation of proverbs, all of which are arguably used as rhetorical techniques by their authors. It is likely that many proverbs may have arisen in an oral context, but at some point in time they were written down and became an established literary genre also.

The above examples are taken mainly from Proverbs, but these proverb types are also found in other wisdom books, most predominantly in Ben Sira. Job uses fewer proverbs than the other books, while the writer of Ecclesiastes uses them in the context of his own interpretation, setting up a traditional viewpoint but then disagreeing with it. The proverbs Ecclesiastes cites are not known from elsewhere, raising the question of whether this author has made a few up for his own purposes. Nevertheless, whether they are traditional proverbs or not, he enjoys setting different viewpoints against each other and using them to open up wider discussion. For example, in 8:14 and 9:1–2 the righteous and wicked share the same fate whilst in 2:26, 3:17, and 8:12–13 their fates are differentiated along traditional lines.

Ben Sira is rich in proverbs of all types (notably in chapters 1–43) and tends to order them more thematically than the book of Proverbs, such that one finds noticeable clusters such as filial duty (Sir 3:1–5); the art of government (9:7–10:18); and even table manners (31:12–32:13). This author also uses the techniques of juxtaposing opposite viewpoints (e.g. 13:3 where he contrasts wealth and poverty) and of the interpretation with a proverb technique, both of which are found in Ecclesiastes (e.g. 33:14–15; 39:33–34). The Wisdom of Solomon uses them less, but there is an interesting list in Wis 7:17–20 spelling out the entire curriculum of the wise person.

The other key wisdom genre is the 'instruction', as paralleled in Egyptian instruction literature. This features strongly in Prov 1–9 and is in the format of a parent giving advice to a child. There are thought to be ten instructions in Prov 1–9 (although some scholars prefer to speak of one long instruction, notably Weeks 2010), one involving a grandparent as well as a parent (Prov 4:3). They take the form of advice from one more experienced to one less educated. This advice includes warnings (for example, against 'loose women') and exhortations to listen to Wisdom (linking up with the choices embodied in the path imagery), as well as calls to attention (Prov 5:1). There is a particularly striking parallel in Prov 22:17–23:11 with the Instruction of Amenemope from Egypt, suggesting some cross-cultural interchange and a similar educational context of scribal learning across the generations. Individual proverbs can make up the longer instructions, but they are contextualized in the teaching framework. Instructions are not so common in other wisdom material – in Ben Sira one can find hymns, poems, and prayers that break up the sayings material, whilst in the Wisdom of Solomon these hymnic, prayerful, and poetic genres are most frequent.

2.4 Character formation

The overall purpose of the collections of proverbs can be hard to surmise because of their broad miscellany of topics, with concerns ranging from wealth and poverty to hard work and laziness, wise action and foolish behaviour, pride and humility, righteous and wicked types, and so on. There is also interest in communication and in the power of speech for effecting good or evil, for decision-making and planning, and for relationships of all types – family, friends, neighbours, or even dealings with kings. However, a key concern here is with the formation of character in its many facets. Much of the material is directed at young people in the process of formation, but there is also concern with lifelong learning (Prov 1:5–7) and anxiety over those who are 'wise in their own eyes' (Prov 26:5, 12). Acquiring wisdom is a process that never ends, and experience gradually builds up – not only over the timespan of an individual but that of many generations. Wisdom is passed down from one generation to the next and it needs to be treated carefully, as conveyed by the parental instructions of Proverbs 1–9. Father and mother are both featured in these instructions, both taking on the role of teacher to the child/pupil.

Job contains much ribbing of the wisdom that the friends purport to have which is based on traditional values but overturned for Job when his world turns upside-down. Where true wisdom indeed lies is a question posed by Job 28. Ecclesiastes spends some time wrestling with the worth of wisdom (Dell 2020a) – is it really worthwhile to spend one's life seeking wisdom when the vanity of worldly pursuits and the common fate of death for all humanity are all that are in view? Is it worth trying to be 'so very wise' in the face of a world in which wickedness seems to flourish and ignorant characters have their place? On the one hand, wisdom is the goal of the speaker's life (Eccl 1:3), but questions arise upon his

realization that ultimate wisdom is unattainable and that a system of wisdom at work in the world is hard to find. Ben Sira is also concerned with the formation of character on a more traditional level, although some social stereotypes seem to be reinforced here, such as the place of women in 9:1–9). The value of wisdom is less of a theme in Wisdom of Solomon, but additional concerns are raised, such as condemnation of a life of sensual gratification (Wis 1:16–2:24) or of the worship of idols, seen as ‘the beginning and cause and end of every evil’ (Wis 14:27).

2.5 Emotional guidance

In Proverbs, all the emotions are captured – hopes and fears, joy and pain, anger, sorrow, laughter, and more. There is a kind of emotional intelligence that accompanies the navigation of life found in proverbs (Yoder 2005). The goal of the acquisition of wisdom and of the rounding of character is ultimately to discover some kind of joy in life and yet also to have the skills to navigate other emotions, to cope with difficult and sorrowful situations such as the loss of a loved one. The path of life is not smooth, but it is largely how one copes with problems that is key, and one aspect of this is allowing time for moments of joy, controlling the anger that threatens to well up and spoil relationships, and to learn how to cope with pain and suffering. Job does not deal well with pain and suffering, and he spends a good deal of time lamenting his lot on a physical as well as an emotional level. He has more to learn about control of his emotions, and yet the very fact that he allows himself to express them gives a profundity to this material that is lacking elsewhere in the wisdom tradition.

Ecclesiastes is an advocate of enjoyment, and there are passages of hope within the book despite it often being seen as quite pessimistic. The author has a sense of the balancing of life’s problems with an awareness of the good and worthwhile. His emphasis is on what can be appreciated and achieved in one’s short life. Ben Sira, like Proverbs, contains proverbs that alternate between optimism and pessimism about life in a kind of miscellany (e.g. he contrasts death as a fate that is both bitter and sweet in Sir 41:1–2). For the Wisdom of Solomon, relationship is extremely important – human relationships with Wisdom and Wisdom’s relationship with God – and this involves emotions of piety, loyalty, and trust in what Wisdom has to offer (Wis 8:3–16).

2.6 The good life

Healthy emotions are one aspect of what makes up ‘the good life’. In the epilogue to Job, the good life is summed up as long life, good health, and progeny (also echoed in chapters 29–31 as the kind of life Job once led). However, what concerns Job himself in the dialogues is the quality of his relationship with God – something that appears to be taken away when he is abandoned in his sickness and suffering and which he longs for. In Ecclesiastes, moments of enjoyment are fleeting – but worthwhile – and ‘good’ – but do

not take away from the injustices prevalent in society. In the Solomonic 'test of pleasure' in 1:12–2:26, King Solomon supposedly weighs up what it is to 'know wisdom' and considers what makes for satisfaction in life; his conclusion is that no one thing satisfies, not wealth (although poverty is also undesirable) and not power (despite the attractive trappings of kingship). He seems to conclude that 'in much wisdom is much vexation' (1:18) and he finds it ultimately unattainable (Eccl 7:23). Yet he recommends life with a partner (for him a good wife, which can be hard to find; Eccl 9:9). Ultimately, fearing God and living according to wisdom's principles is the only answer.

In Proverbs, there is less of a sense of movement towards a specific goal but there remains an attitude of optimism about a life well lived. There is a sense of security conveyed through making the right choices in life. Justice and righteousness are valued above all else, except perhaps the acquisition of wisdom itself. The abuse of wealth and power are criticized and inequality is seen as a fact of life. Perhaps the only way out of a life of poverty is to work hard and obtain the security of money. At the heart of Proverbs is a celebration of 'life', which is a positive good in apposition to its opposite, death, which is not just a human fate but a way of living under its shadow (associated with wickedness and evil). A picture of the good life of a woman is found at the end of the book in Proverbs 31, where the industrious wife who is a homemaker and businesswoman is praised (this forms a frame with Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly in Prov 1–9).

For Proverbs, all social relationships are important. For Ben Sira, there is an equal stress on social relationships, but it is accompanied by the idea that adherence to the law is the real marker of a good life. True wisdom is embodied in the Mosaic law, which also integrates salvation history into the wisdom discourse (Sir 44:1–50:21). Thus, good actions in society must be based on the law. For the Wisdom of Solomon, good and evil are seen as forces linked to the creative wisdom of the spirit of God, and there is a binary view of God versus evil which takes the book into the realms of angelology (Wis 1:13; 2:24). There is also a new emphasis on the community of the elect (Wis 3:9; 15:2).

2.7 Communication

As already mentioned, the communication theme is important in wisdom material and has often been under-emphasized. The importance of the spoken word is clear, especially in Proverbs. This involves human to human communication, human to God communication, and even communication between both of these and the natural world. It is through the words one speaks that one reveals oneself and becomes known to others, giving insight into a person's character, emotions, and priorities. God is described in Proverbs as speaking words (e.g. Prov 30:5, 'every word of God proves true') and the anthropomorphic language of lips, tongue, and mouth are used of God as it is of humans. In Proverbs, the lips are the guardians of the mouth, enabling the wise to judge when to speak noble

things and 'what is right' (Prov 8:6b). Yet communication is not just about speaking; it is also about knowing when to be silent (Prov 5:2). The king's lips are described as 'righteous' (Prov 16:10, 13) and he makes 'inspired decisions' (Prov 15:1). By contrast, those of the loose woman 'drip honey' (Prov 5:3) and are a snare (Prov 6:2).

Job too 'did not sin with his lips' (2:10b), although he becomes very verbose in the course of the dialogues. When God replies to him, however, Job's words become few. The friends purport to know that God speaks consoling words (Job 15:11), but ultimately God tells them they 'have not spoken of me what is right' (Job 42:7), unlike Job himself. This theme is less prominent in Ecclesiastes, but a proverb in Eccl 10:12 is quoted: 'Words spoken by the wise bring them favour, but the lips of fools consume them'. However, the changing mood and ambivalence about the positives and negatives of life in Ecclesiastes give a sense that the author is cleverly communicating life's ambivalence. In Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon, communication takes new forms, notably that of prayer and in the emphasis on key relationships with God and Wisdom (Sir 24:1–22; Wis 7:22–8:2).

3 Divine Wisdom

3.1 God as creator

The presupposition of all wisdom books, canonical and extra-canonical, is that God is creator of the world. He is also creator in other books of the OT/HB, but in the wisdom literature he is solely the creator and the lack of reference to God's more salvific roles is notable. In the later wisdom books there is a move towards linking wisdom ideas with more traditional and nationalistic concepts, notably Torah in Ben Sira, but in its earlier phase wisdom material lacked salvific elements. God is simply assumed as creator of the world; there is also an inherent monotheism in that no other gods are mentioned as a threat to Yahweh, so God's overlordship is complete (Perdue 1994). There is also an unspoken universalism in the material, too, in that God gives wisdom to all – it is on offer to all who will hear and learn and be taught.

It is in the book of Job that one can find the most profound description of God as creator (an account in many ways more interesting one than is found in the ever-popular Genesis 1–3). In Job 38, God responds to Job with a series of questions, including: 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?' (Job 38:4). The question is followed by a series of jibes at Job, highlighting that – as a human being – he was clearly not present at creation and thus cannot know the answers to the questions that God poses. Yet more interesting than the questions themselves is what is revealed about the created world in the process. God reveals that he did lay the foundation of the earth, determining its measurements. The language of house-building is used – the plumb line, the foundations, the cornerstone (38:5–6). A chorus of heavenly beings is revealed as enjoying the process alongside God, but Job is not to be found among them.

The description advances the idea of containment – much of the creative act is about containment of chaos. This is most necessary for the sea: there is an image of it being shut in with doors (38:8, 10), recalling the imagery of the doors of the womb that shut the baby inside the mother of a yet-unborn child (v. 8). The imagery continues, with the clouds likened to the first garment a child would wear at birth and the darkness likened to a swaddling band. This image of the sea, though, is ultimately about keeping the waters back and preventing them from overtaking the world (v. 11).

The description moves on to the regularity of the dawn, turning night into day. Here there is an image of the dawn lighting up the world such that the forces of darkness are overcome. The wicked are associated with darkness, so the dawn ‘take[s] hold of the skirts of the earth and the wicked are shaken out of it’ (v. 13). Light also changes the colour of things, and this is likened to clay becoming lighter as it dries or a garment changing colour when dyed (v. 14). The expanse of the earth, the seas, and even the gates of death are described (vv. 16–18); the sources of light and darkness (vv. 19–21); the storehouses of hail and snow, brought out for ‘times of trouble’ (v. 23) and of the distribution of light and wind (vv. 22–24). The rain is described as falling even ‘on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life’ (v. 26), an interesting acknowledgement of the scientific observations of the day where rain was not simply for human benefit (vv. 25–27). Birth imagery returns, with God begetting dew and the womb giving birth to ice and hoarfrost (38:30–31). The constellations are acknowledged and their rules – the rhetorical effect of which is to emphasize that Job cannot understand mysteries such as this (38:31–33). The power of God to cause flood and lightnings, provide rain, and even give wisdom to living creatures (38:34–48) rounds off the description of the creation of the world, but the rest of the description moves to individual animals (38:39–39:30).

Before moving on from the rich description of creation in Job, it is important to mention the large monsters of chapter 40:15–41. These are often identified with the chaos monster overcome at creation, as found in many ancient Near East accounts of creation (e.g. the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*) and possibly hinted at in Genesis with the constraining of the deep. This relies on the idea that God was in conflict with the forces of chaos at the time of creation. The first animal Behemoth sounds like a hippopotamus but is described as ‘the first of the great acts of God – only its Maker can approach it with the sword’ (40:19). This may suggest some primeval contest, and Behemoth is described as being very difficult to overcome.

The description of Leviathan is more obviously connected to the primeval events. Again it is described as hard to overcome, although it has been attempted in many ways, such that ‘[a]ny hope of capturing it will be disappointed; were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it?’ (41:9). This perhaps suggests the supremacy of God over lesser gods (cf. 41:25). The message is that only God can overcome Leviathan’s mighty strength and

penetrate its coat of mail (41:12–13). It is a mighty creature – and the description is long and involved, giving the impression of an enormous crocodile. It ‘makes the deep boil like a pot; it makes the sea like a pot of ointment’ (41:31), such that even the primeval depths are affected and ‘on earth it has no equal’ (41:33), and only God can conquer it.

This rich description shows us the knowledge that the biblical authors had of the world and how they understood it. They appear to regard the world as flat, and so they asked questions such as where the sun went at night and where snow or lightning bolts come from, as presumably they must be stored somewhere. Even the sun and moon are assumed to have rested at different times of the day and come out of their hiding places at dawn and dusk. The description of the great beasts also shows a deep knowledge of the most dangerous of animals. The author is familiar with both domesticated beasts and with wild ones, and the message is that God is in control of all life across a vast ecosystem of plants, animals, and humanity.

3.2 Wisdom as a bridge

There is no doubt that within the wisdom worldview God is in charge, but the concept of wisdom itself is also highly prized. The imagery found in Proverbs 1–9, of wisdom as a personified woman, becomes highly influential for the portrayal of the worth and individuality of Wisdom in the wisdom tradition (Camp 1985). The feminine portrayal helps to offset the rather masculine portrayal of God (although the womb imagery in the Job passage described above indicates a less strictly masculine view of God) and this has led some to find vestiges of a goddess in the Wisdom figure (Lang 1986). In Egyptian thought there was an abstract principle of order known as Ma’at, which later became a goddess figure (Boström 1990). Here too the principle seems to be an abstract one, of Wisdom as the facilitator of creation. She is described in Prov 8:22–31 as having been beside God when the world was created, assisting and rejoicing in what God makes. She, rather than Behemoth, is God’s first act, in that she is created by God and ‘set up at the first, before the beginning of the earth’ (8:23); yet she is involved in the ordering of the world according to God’s prescriptions. Her description also recalls the creative acts much as Job 38 did – she preceded the depths, water, mountains, earth, fields, and soil (8:24–26). In telling us that Wisdom preceded these things, the author is also telling us about them. Again one finds the language of God building the world: ‘he drew a circle on the face of the deep [...] he made firm the skies above [...] he established the fountains of the deep’ (8:27–28) and crucially again he set limits for the sea (8:29). Wisdom takes delight in God’s actions, in God’s created world, and in the human race (8:30–31). She is also a bridge between God and humanity, in that her call to humans is to be wise, to listen to instruction, to learn from experience. Nothing less than life itself is on offer: ‘whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the LORD’ (8:35).

There is a crucial need for human response to God. This is mentioned in Proverbs as having the ‘fear of the LORD’, an ultimately pious response when avenues of more logical and rational enquiry seem to have dried up and the limits of the wisdom quest have perhaps been reached (Prov 1:29; 2:5; 9:10; 10:27 and many other examples). This ‘fear of the LORD’ is also advocated by Woman Wisdom (8:13). It reappears in Job 28, the hymn to wisdom, in the last line of the piece. Again the wonders of the created world are described, but this time in relation to the precious stones and jewels to be found deep in the earth. This poem is about the mystery of wisdom in that she appears to be hidden, however deep humans dig and whatever wonders they find. Here Wisdom is more elusive, whereas in Proverbs her wares are on display; but the poem nevertheless ends on the point that ‘the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom’ (28:28) – that is the ultimate fusion of God and the acquisition of wisdom, as enabled by the figure of Wisdom. She is a poetic metaphor rather than a real goddess, but she is a crucial part of the God-world relationship for these writers (see [section 5](#) for descriptions of wisdom in Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon).

3.3 Moral actions and divine expectation

It is often said that most of the individual proverbs are quite secular, in that mention of God is sparse and the concerns are largely with human activity in all its breadth and diversity. However, there are proverbs that mention God (notably those clustered in Prov 16) and arguably God stands behind the quest and directs the action. Ultimately, proverbs contain all kinds of advice for the individual, but it is the individual within the community and within society. The emphases of individual proverbs on different character types – the righteous and the wicked – is an ethical designation that points to an extreme. It is unrealistic to think any individual is ever totally righteous or totally wicked (arguably Job is an exception, according to Job 1:1). These are binary opposites, points on a spectrum on which one can measure ethical behaviour. There are clear paths for moral action that will lead one on the path of wisdom and help one to live one’s best and most fulfilling life. The opposite thorny path is also described, which will lead to failure and death. The choice seems stark and lacking nuance, and yet people are advised to place their own lives within the context of these truisms.

Ultimately, proverbs are the result of cumulative experience, what human beings have discovered about their own nature, the nature of others, and their relationships within society, within the natural world, and within the wider world, including relationship with the divine. Human beings may plan their lives, but God has the ultimate answers (Prov 16:1). God will judge ethical actions and even the most righteous will be ‘weighed [in] the spirit’ (16:2). Indeed, it is better to put one’s plans into God’s hands, as God will direct the action anyway and one might as well be in tune with God’s plan (16:3), since ‘[t]he LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble’ (16:4). There

is almost a sense of predestination here – as also found in Ecclesiastes in the author's resigned tone (e.g. in Eccl 3, the time poem) – and yet there are also calls to action, to make choices, and to behave in appropriate ethical ways. Even in commercial dealings, where scales can be tampered with so as to benefit the seller, 'honest balances and scales are the LORD's; all the weights in the bag are his work' (16:11). God will judge such behaviour because God knows all things.

Punishment and reward is a common theme across the wisdom material. In Ben Sira, it is geared towards more religious relationships, such that pious behaviour comes into the picture more strongly than in preceding books (Sir 32:14–24). Punishment and reward will certainly be meted out fairly by God (Sir 33:13–15) but it is also up to the individual to make the right choices (17:6f). The Wisdom of Solomon contains warnings against bad behaviour, such as pride, and praise of certain virtues (which are always preferable to vices). For example, Wis 3:13–14; 4:1 include barren women and eunuchs in the category of God's favoured people, as long as they are virtuous. Virtue is synonymous with a full faith in God (Wis 1:2–5) and God's creation even fights on behalf of the righteous, introducing a divine motivation for good behaviour (Wis 5:15–23; see Clifford and Collins 1992 for discussions around the variety and development of creation ideas across the centuries of biblical engagement with the topic).

4 Questioning leading to fresh wisdom

4.1 Challenge to a simple worldview

The focus so far has been on the way in which the book of Proverbs sets up the key themes of the wisdom worldview. However, it is clear that a challenge to Proverbs was mounted from within the tradition, as expressed largely in the book of Job, but also arguably in Ecclesiastes, too. This section will focus on these two books. Both date after the exile: Job between the sixth and fourth centuries and Ecclesiastes probably the third century (though note the theory of Seow, that Ecclesiastes was composed in the fifth century, due to the socioeconomic situation reflected in the book). They each represent development away from the Proverbs 'norm'. There was a simplicity and 'black and white' quality to Proverbs that invited challenge – was it always true that those who behaved well were rewarded by God? Were the paths that straight after all? What about God's plans for the world, were they always fair? And wasn't death the ultimate fate of all, rendering all striving in life worthless? These are the kinds of questions raised in Job and Ecclesiastes, putting the theory of just reward and punishment into the context of real human lives. This had consequences for belief itself: although Job never questions his faith and his relationship with God, it is tested to the limit; and while the passivity and resignation of Ecclesiastes does not lead to suicidal or godless thoughts, it veers close to them. In fact,

the author of Ecclesiastes ultimately recommends enjoyment when it is possible to find it – although in the context of the vanity of everything this rings a little hollow.

In the book of Job, the first sign of Job's dissatisfaction with God comes in chapter 3. Until that point he seems to be accepting of what comes to him from God, whether it be fair or not (1:21; 2:10). The opening lament of Job in chapter 3 gives a very different picture, one of a man in despair at what he has lost. With overtones of the undoing of creation, Job asks for even the day of his birth to be cursed, as well as the night that he was conceived – 'let that day be darkness!' he cries (Job 3:4, cf. vv. 5–6). If only the doors of his mother's womb had been shut and that he had not emerged into the world (3:10)! His wish is to have died at birth and so never experienced such a difficult life as his life has now become on the death of his children and the loss of all for which he had striven. Job is now full of dread; he feels fenced in by God; he sighs and groans and he knows no peace (3:23–26). This chapter sets the tone for the words of Job in the rest of the dialogue. The friends seek to counter his words with more traditional arguments about the fate of righteous and wicked, but Job's experience leads him to contradict them.

Ecclesiastes also shows awareness of injustice, particularly in chapter 5 when the author briefly considers the poor. In 5:13, he finishes a diatribe about the greed of the rich, but then he turns to those who lose their riches (5:14) or to those who are simply born poor (5:15). For such people their lives are lived in darkness – they have little to eat, they are sick, they are resentful (5:17). The following verses turn to the need to enjoy life despite one's lot and have a more optimistic tone, but the way the author frames the issue in real experience sets the wider tone of the discussion.

4.2 Individual experience versus received tradition

The book of Job is about an individual's experience that contradicts the mainstream, and this is the keynote of this new development in wisdom thought that is interested in exceptions to the rules. Much of the OT/HB is communal in its thinking, with the fate of the covenant people at the centre of concern. In the period of the Israelite exile, exile was understood as a just fate sent by God for the punishment of all the people under the leadership of the king. Only Ezekiel of the exilic prophets starts to muse on the idea that individuals should be marked out to be spared the punishment (e.g. Ezek 9:4). The book of Job comes out of this context as an individual paradigm of the just sufferer, and this raises new questions about the justice of wholesale principles. In wisdom terms, this leads to questioning of the doctrine of retribution, in that the wicked often prosper whilst the righteous suffer. The author asks how this can be understood, in the light of this new experiential evidence which has Job calling out to God in his despair. The friends of Job seek to put him right and to say that there are always two sides to arguments – the fourth friend Elihu even tells Job to wait for his reward, as eventually it will come and one has

to have patience (Job 35:14). The friends' approach is more traditional, as reflected in Proverbs, and Job once shared their views – but now he questions them. How can he now relate to a God who appears to have turned against him? He does retain belief in God – although many suffering as he has would not – but belief in the existence of God is very little without a relationship with God that is meaningful and real.

4.3 Retributive justice overturned

The prosperity of the wicked is a real problem for wisdom writers, and also for psalmists: indeed, some psalms relate very much to these kinds of problems. Psalm 73, for example, speaks of the prosperity of the wicked: 'For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people' (Ps 73:4–5). This leads them to overconfidence and pride, prosperity, fatness, and folly, says the Psalms, scoffing at others and influencing for wrongdoing (73:6–9). People even mistake them for good people (73:10)! The psalmist is beginning to wonder why he has behaved so well and yet seems to be punished rather than rewarded (73:13–14). However, this psalm has a turning point in verse 15, when the Psalmist recounts a religious experience 'in the sanctuary of God' where he realizes that the wicked will ultimately be punished and that this prosperity is fleeting: 'They are like a dream when one awakes; on waking you despise their phantoms' (73:20). The psalmist then chastises himself for his seeming stupidity (73:21–22) and turns, in the final section of the psalm, to praise God.

The psalmist's solution is not so straightforward for Job, whose relationship with God is not restored until the end of the book. Only then is Job justified by God; he even offers a sacrifice on behalf of the friends, to atone for any sins committed, before his actual restoration to prosperity in the epilogue (Job 42:7–17). In Ecclesiastes, too, there is ambivalence about the reward and punishment scheme, but it is all relativized by death: 'The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness, Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them' (2:14). This leads the author to challenge the point of trying to be wise, as one's wisdom is not remembered after death (2:15–16). Life and toil start to feel meaningless and ethical behaviour is thus relativized.

4.4 The good life challenged

The challenge to the good life can be easily stated: what is the point of life if death relativizes all? This is a key question for the author of Ecclesiastes. The wealth for which one has worked and strived will all ultimately go to someone else, wise or foolish, one does not know. One's work is hard, and what is the point of it? Will one be remembered for all one has tried to achieve, and if not, why try to be wise in the light of the vanity of everything? Ecclesiastes introduces the idea of profit – what profit is there to behaving well in life? (Schoors 2013 sees this as the author's main question, to which the rest of

the book is an attempt at an answer.) The only truly positive answer that appears is the idea of enjoying life when one can, but the context is a life of hardship and toil where those moments are rare and fleeting. Even the book of Proverbs has a small sceptical section at the end, in the words of Agur (Prov 30:1–4) who feels weary when striving to be wise and feels stupid. This opens up another question, that is, of the level on which one engages with life. For Agur, God's mysteries (described once again in terms of creation) are so great and his powers so superior to those of humans that Agur feels weary of even trying to understand. Illness leads Job to a similar position of weariness and even despair. His descriptions of his bodily anguish (e.g. Job 19:17–20) are often lost in the theological profundity of his laments, yet they are an important element of his suffering in that body and mind are a psychosomatic unity.

4.5 Relativizing life in the light of death

Ecclesiastes is perhaps the biblical book most famous for relativizing life in light of death (e.g. Eccl 5:13–16). It colours the book's whole worldview, as indicated in the last section. However, another wisdom psalm, Psalm 49, asks similar questions. The psalmist is as troubled as the author of Ecclesiastes about the fact that the wise and fool both die (cf. Eccl 2:16–21). He is using the oppositional pair of wise/fool rather than righteous/wicked, a category that the wisdom books also use (along with others; see Eccl 9:2). The issue is not merely the fact of death but of leaving wealth to others (Ps 49:10). This troubles the author of Ecclesiastes: 'who knows whether [those who inherit] they will be wise or foolish?' (2:19). Psalm 49 speaks about death as the ultimate destination of all – the grave and Sheol – but then becomes upbeat in verse 15, saying that 'God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol'. This helps to set the psalmist straight about the injustices he sees around him – the rich are not to be envied or feared because they will die unable to take their wealth with them (49:17). Even a happy life is relativized by this ultimate fate (49:18).

4.6 Theodicy and belief in God in the light of questioning

Despite the trend towards questioning all aspects of the human condition and of God's role in human lives and fates, these books retain a belief in God. The problem of justice looms large in the book of Job, with fundamental questions raised about whether God behaves in a just manner towards human beings (Crenshaw 2005): if he does, why does innocent suffering occur? The book's prologue has Job responding that good and bad alike must be accepted as from God, whatever the circumstances; but this perspective changes in Job's opening lament and subsequently in his speeches (as discussed above). In Job's diatribe, he characterizes God as a warrior shooting arrows at him, and as having hidden his face from Job. A rich body of metaphors is used to describe God hedging Job in, hunting him down, and causing him endless grief. Job even asks for an intercessor

to judge between himself and a God who has turned cruel and is no longer the God of justice that he recognizes. An impartial redeemer separate from God is a vain hope in this context, but Christians have taken up this language and referred it to Christ's role.

By contrast to Job, the picture of God in Ecclesiastes is more passive. There is a strong sense that God has determined a time for everything and that there is nothing that human beings can do except be puppets in God's game. Time and chance are both in the hands of God (Eccl 9:11; see discussion of time in this book in Bundvad 2015) – the swift runner does not necessarily win the race, nor the strong win the battle; the wise person doesn't necessarily get the bread required to live, the intelligent do not become rich, the skilful are not favoured. This is the reality of life under the sun, and it must simply be accepted as the way things are. Nothing is fair in life, and all is in God's control. Life is fleeting and futile, says the preacher, and there is no profit to be had at all. However, fear of God is all that there is (12:13–14) and God will judge deeds at the end of the day. Belief in God is presupposed, in the same way as it is across the biblical wisdom literature. An attitude of pious reverence and acceptance seems to be the ultimate answer to these problems.

5 Apocryphal and New Testament developments

5.1 Wise sayings

Wise sayings unite these wisdom books both inside and outside the canon. Job has a paucity of wisdom sayings and a great deal more of lament, which aligns it closer to psalms of lament or the confessions of Jeremiah than to Proverbs (Kynes 2012). However, the apocryphal book of Ben Sira is different, as its sayings predominate along more traditional lines. There are also other genres such as hymns and prayers, and a general sense of moving in the direction of a wider use of genres from the OT/HB, as well as more familiar theological concerns. A close relationship is also revealed between Wisdom of Solomon and the material of the NT, since Wisdom reveals the kind of Jewish expectation that was emerging just before the time of Jesus in a poetic prophecy concerning the righteous man who is to come (Wis 2:12–20).

Jesus was well-known as a wise teacher who uttered sayings, although his wisdom mainly took the form of parables. Parables were sometimes little more than one line – e.g. the parable of the yeast – and so can be likened to proverbs, but at other times they were more extensive stories with a particular message. They can be likened to the autobiographical narratives found in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Jesus makes a strange point about parables (Matt 13:10–17), saying that they are hidden to most people and are not to be perceived; they are only understandable to those who really listen, such as the disciples. According to Jesus, God deliberately made the revelation gradual – awaiting the moment of fulfilment in Christ – and many righteous people of the past never had a chance to know this fulfilment (13:17).

5.2 Divine Wisdom and the Logos

One of the most interesting developments in theological ideas across the Apocryphal wisdom books and into the New Testament is the development of the idea of Wisdom. She emerges in Proverbs as a personified poetic figure, God's helper, a bridge to humankind but also created. She does not appear in Job and Ecclesiastes (unless Eccl 7:13 refers to Woman Wisdom when he is seeking one woman in a thousand; Kruger 1972), but she features in her fullness in Ben Sira and in the Wisdom of Solomon. There are hymns to Wisdom in both books, and she gradually emerges as identical with Torah, in that those who follow her also follow the law (as an abstract entity to be prized, rather than as wisdom to be gained). In that identification, she is God's first thought and creation, linked to the special relationship with Israel as well as to the universal offer of wisdom. In Ben Sira, the notion of Wisdom is developed into being synonymous with Torah, and the way to both is through the fear of the LORD (fully defined in Sir 1:11–30).

The figure of Wisdom is developed in Ben Sira 24 where she becomes more than a bridge, especially in verse 3: 'I came forth from the mouth of the Most High'. Wisdom is then described as circuiting the heavens and earth and at last finding a resting place in Israel. Here, her divine origin is more explicitly stated and more immediate, and she resides in Israel ('Make your dwelling in Jacob and in Israel receive your inheritance', 24:8). She also rests in the temple, the seat of the presence of God (Sir 24:10). She is part of the primeval order but also linked to the salvation history and the revelation of God in the temple, thereby uniting different spheres of Israelite life and becoming all-encompassing (Von Rad 1972).

Wisdom of Solomon 7:22–8:2 contains a Wisdom poem paralleling the others, but not aligning Wisdom with Torah. Rather she is seen as an actual attribute of God, i.e. the divine feminine. She is seen as 'a breath of the power of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty' (Wis 7:25), making Wisdom almost synonymous with God. While she is still seen as acting in creation, she is 'a reflection of eternal light' (7:26) and precedes the light:

She is more beautiful than the sun and excels every constellation of the stars. Compared with the light she is found to be superior [...]. (Wis 7:29–30)

Despite this grandeur, she still has a teaching role and offers her wares – knowledge, riches, understanding, righteousness, and experience – to her would-be followers (8:3–16). In the Wisdom of Solomon, she therefore emerges not as a created being but as an essential attribute of the Divine (Von Rad 1972). From there, some ancient Christian texts started to identify her with the Holy Spirit. Also from this starting point, via the thought of

Philo and other Greek thinkers, she becomes identified with the Logos, the pre-existent divine principle in creation, planned from the beginning and ultimately becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ. This connects with John's prologue, where the Logos is linked to light (rather than wisdom) and to God's purposes for the world. Hymns to God in the NT (e.g. Col 1:15–20, which reflects Prov 8 as well as Gen 1) also reflect developments in thought about wisdom in relation to the revelation in Christ.

5.3 Hidden sayings and the afterlife

Rather like the secrecy over to whom the parables will be revealed in their full substance and message, there are also cryptic sayings from Jesus, especially where the afterlife is concerned. The wisdom tradition occasionally hints at an afterlife belief (but not in Proverbs, for which 'life' is a long life well-lived, Prov 9:11; see also Prov 5:11). In Job 19, for example, Job expresses his hope that he will one day see God again after the worms have destroyed his body. The most likely reference here is to the decomposition of the body after death, although it is also pointed out that Job's body is covered with worms because of his diseased skin. It is also debated whether he says 'in my body' or 'outside my body' when he speaks of seeing God.

Ecclesiastes seems to see death as the final word and life as a 'portion' given by God (9:9): death is the great relativizer. This is also true for Ben Sira, although he says: 'Do not fear death's decree for you; remember those who went before you and those who will come after' (41:3) – the idea of 'generations' is, in a sense, one of permanence and continuation (cf. Eccl 1:3–11). Ben Sira also ultimately advocates the fear of the Lord, which is 'the root of wisdom and her branches are long life' (Sir 1:20), rather than a hope of the afterlife.

For the Wisdom of Solomon, life is short and one is urged not to 'invite death by the error of your life' (Wis 1:12). The book has similar ideas to Ecclesiastes about human names and works being forgotten so that life will 'pass away like the traces of a cloud, and be scattered like mist' (Wis 2:4). This author does acknowledge that God has power over life and death and remarks that '[y]ou [God] lead mortals down to the gates of Hades and back again' (Wis 16:13). This is intriguing but is not, by itself, a strong indication of an afterlife, being rather more about God's power. By the time of the New Testament, ideas of an afterlife abound and yet there is still a sense of secrecy about it (cf. the emphasis on the messianic secret in the Gospel of Mark).

6 Conclusion

It is often said that ideas found in the wisdom material have an immediacy and a relevance to today's world that is striking. General maxims on human behaviour, emotions, and activities have clearly not changed for thousands of years, and so they go on being cited

and remain relevant. Trying to live a fulfilled life is still the goal of most people, whether that be through religious channels or not. The art of coping with life, of forming one's own character, of knowing how to treat people and how to communicate most effectively with them, and how to handle suffering, evil, and difficult situations – all of these are essential life lessons for us all. And who among us would not prefer to be a little wiser than we are now? We tend to look up to older people who have had a longer time to learn than we have, and the wisdom of age is a reality that those engaged in the quest for eternal youth would do well to remember. Wisdom is about seeking satisfaction in life but also deeper meaning and purpose: in the wisdom books, this works primarily on an individual level but translates into human society, communities, and very identity. The importance of God for gaining wisdom varies for people depending on their perspective; however, the wisdom literature sees God as the creator in control of destiny, holding life and death in his hand, and wishing to be in relationship with humankind, guiding and directing human lives. This God calls on people to fear and trust in him, and says that all will then be well. Through the bridge of Wisdom, life is on offer to those who will accept it in all its fullness.

Attributions

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