



The Interpretation of Wisdom Literature of the Bible, Part 1

By David Penchansky

I am currently writing a book about wisdom literature: what it is, who wrote it, and why. I will summarize some of my findings in this article. I should start out by telling you that, for at least a century and a half, the wisdom books of the Bible have embarrassed biblical scholars. In their search for the one idea that unites the whole Hebrew Bible, some suggested “covenant,” others “law and grace,” and still others “God’s intervention in history”—but whichever one they chose, the wisdom books didn’t fit in.

Then, in the early 1960s, some scholars suggested that the wisdom literature of the Bible had its own unique voice and theology. That is what I will write about here: wisdom’s unique voice. These are the wisdom books in the Bible, in their probable order of writing: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Ben Sira (also called Sirach, also called Ecclesiasticus), and the Wisdom of Solomon. The first three are included in the Jewish and Protestant Bibles. The ancient Greek translation, the Septuagint, and the Bibles of the Eastern Churches and the Roman Catholic Church include all five books in their Scriptures.

These books were probably written by sages, what we might call “the Israelite intelligentsia.” There is hot debate between (a) those who think there is a group of sages, as distinct from (for instance) prophets or priests, and (b) those who think there was a general intellectual movement among the Israelite elite but no distinct sage group. I agree with those who see a distinct sage class.

The sages did not spend all their time writing wisdom books. They also served as diplomats, palace bureaucrats, counselors and advisors to the king, educators, and scientists. The sages wrote the wisdom books over the course of almost 1,000 years. The books passed through many different hands and many editors. (Biblical editors had a much freer hand than modern editors to change and rearrange the material.) The most helpful division I find distinguishes between three different types of wisdom that run through all five previously mentioned books:

- 1) Village wisdom/folk wisdom is characterized by short, pithy statements, examples drawn from nature, framed as instruction from parents to their children.
- 2) Royal wisdom comes from one of the Israelite capitals. Its maxims instruct junior bureaucrats on the intricacies of palace politics.
- 3) Theological wisdom consists of deep reflection upon the most controversial of theological topics: Is there a God? If there is a God, why do such awful things happen? Is there a purpose to life? Are we any different from animals? What happens after death? Does everyone get what he or she deserves? Presumably, professional sages wrote these works to assert their position on these controversial subjects.

The sages had different sources of information about life. While the prophets received direct revelation from God and the priests followed rituals given to Moses on Mount Sinai, the sages believed that God embedded important principles into the fabric of the universe and that careful observation would yield these principles to the diligent seeker. But the sage actually had two sources of information. The first, as I said, was careful observation of both the natural world and of human behavior. The second was the wisdom tradition, passed down from one sage to another. You may have noticed a significant problem here: what the elders pass down sometimes contradicts the evidence from real life.

For instance, the sages believed in a balanced universe where everybody gets what he or she deserves. The good receive rewards for their goodness, and the evil are punished. But experience shows that good people suffer, while evil people sleep peacefully in their beds. The sages agonized over the contradictions in their system and, as we shall see, took many different sides in their debates.

Proverbs

I am currently working on my chapter on Proverbs, and it is really difficult because the book has no apparent structure, beyond being a random collection of proverbs or, I should say, a collection of collections, because there are five distinct major collections, each with its own introduction:

- 1) The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel (1:1–9:18)
- 2) The proverbs of Solomon (10:1–22:16)
- 3) The words of the wise (22:17–24:22)
- 4) The sayings of the wise (24:23–34)
- 5) Other proverbs of Solomon that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied (25:1–29:27)

Additionally, “The words of Agur” (30) and “The words of King Lemuel” (31) constitute later additions to the work. These collections existed independently and were pasted together by a later editor.

Much of Proverbs takes the form of folk/village proverbs:

A child who gathers in summer is prudent,
but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame. (10:5)

Or royal proverbs:

It is the glory of God to conceal things,
but the glory of kings is to search things out. (25:2)

Most of Proverbs is made up of couplets, two related and balanced sentences that fit together and comment upon each other. However, one also finds in Proverbs extended lyrical and narrative poems. The most famous of these is Proverbs 8, in which Woman Wisdom declares herself and her divine origin.

Many things may be said about Proverbs, but I limit myself to two major observations. First, there was a great wisdom debate among the sages about whether God could be trusted in the governance of the world and whether God was predictable or unpredictable. Most of the authors of Proverbs said yes, that God could indeed be trusted. But even then the sages had divergent ways to understand this confidence. Some argued that a careful practice of wisdom principles (honest speech, hard work, marital faithfulness, etc.) would inevitably lead to a happy, prosperous life. Others argued that, although God's governance of the world is flawless, humans can never be sure what God might do: even if you followed the right path, bad things could still happen to you. "The human mind plans the way, / but the LORD directs the steps" (Prov 16:9).

My second major observation is that there are two opposing figures in Proverbs. They appear in many guises, but the same two women appear throughout. One is named *Hokmah*, the Hebrew word for wisdom, which we translate as "Woman Wisdom." Her counterpart is alternately called "Folly" (*ishet kesilot*) or "the strange/foreign woman" (*ishah zarah*). The two compete for the attention and loyalty of the young male student, but Hokmah wins the day: "She opens her mouth with wisdom, / and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (31:26).

The most astounding passage about Wisdom describes her birth and early childhood. She is Yahweh's daughter, witness to God's creation, playing at his feet as the divine father delights the child with his creative prowess. Some have claimed that Proverbs served as a schoolbook to instruct male sage-hopefuls.

Job

Job is my favorite book in the Bible. It raises the deepest human questions, addressing them in a mature, subtle, and nondogmatic way. The deceptively simple story begins by introducing Job, a rich, well-regarded patriarch with many children. He comes to the attention of Yahweh: "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (1:8). God makes a bet with "the satan" (or, "the adversary"): if they agree to torment Job, God bets that Job will remain faithful, and "the satan" bets that he won't but rather will curse God to his face. They take away Job's wealth, all his children die, and he is struck with a disfiguring, agonizing disease. His wife says, "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die" (2:9).

But Job remains faithful, stating: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (1:21). God wins his bet. Then the tone of the story changes, and the action slows down. Three friends travel to Job to comfort him in his suffering. After his friends sit with him for seven days, Job expresses his feelings: "Let the day perish in which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived'" (3:3). "The satan" had bet that Job would curse God. Instead, he curses his birthday, the closest he can get to cursing God without actually saying it.

What follows is a long theological debate between Job and his friends. It's mostly boring, but there are some lovely parts. I can summarize the argument quickly: Job's friends say that Job must have done something really evil to have deserved such punishment. Job declares his innocence and challenges his friends to accuse him of something he actually did.

Finally Job turns away from his friends in disgust and challenges God directly—and God answers him out of a whirlwind. The readers know what really happened to Job, but Job has no idea what happened. Instead of letting Job know the secret, God accuses Job of arrogance because he dared to question the Almighty. He crushes Job with unanswerable questions. “Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this” (38:17–18).

In the face of divine wrath, Job capitulates and retracts his accusation. “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:5–6). As a result of Job’s “repentance,” God restores him his former wealth and gives him new children to replace the old ones who died. If this were all there was to this story, it would disappoint. But the crux of the book occurs in 42:7, where God accuses Job’s friends: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” What did the friends say? They defended God’s faithfulness and consistency. They claimed that God was fair and would punish only people who did evil. But here Yahweh says they did not speak truthfully. What did Job say that was true? People argue between three different things that Job said:

- a) Some say God here refers to Job’s acceptance of God’s afflictions at the beginning of the book. “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (2:10).
- b) Some claim that this refers to his capitulation at the end of the book. “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:5–6).
- c) I think it refers to his accusations against God in the debate section of the book: “He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me. He has gnashed his teeth at me” (16:9). This is the only option that makes sense. “You have not spoken of me what is true, as has my servant Job.” The author contrasts what Job said with what the friends have said. The only possible contrast between what Job said and what his friends said is in the debate/argument that he had with his friends in chapters 3–36.

The implications of this shatter our comfortable assumptions about the Bible. The author here deeply challenges the wisdom notion that God rewards good behavior and punishes the wicked. God says that, when Job spoke words of accusation against God, Job spoke correctly, according to God. Thus it becomes, according to the book, theologically appropriate to curse God, to accuse God of wrongdoing. In the light of this, the restoration of Job subsequently (42:7–17) becomes nothing more than a cruel, ironic joke. How could God dare to think that giving Job new children to replace the old ones would smooth things over? Job gives us a great example of how even a faithful person can be angry with God.

Next month: Part 2 of Wisdom Literature: Ecclesiastes, Ben Sira, and Wisdom of Solomon.

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