



The Interpretation of Wisdom Literature of the Bible, Part II **By David Penchansky**

Editor's note: *We reprint this first section of Part I to help orient readers to the material that follows.*

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.

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is the most skeptical book in the Bible and one of the most radical. The author of Ecclesiastes questions everything that the Israelites believed. He saw no value in doing good or in being rich, as the future was always subject to forces beyond one's control. Many have noted that after a blistering attack on all that traditional Israelite wisdom holds sacred, the book ends with a shockingly incongruous, pious summary conclusion: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Eccl 12:13-14).

There are many theories to explain this sudden shift of message and mood. In my view, there are three distinct voices in the book of Ecclesiastes. I call them "Fear God Qoheleth," "Seize-the-day Qoheleth," and "Pessimistic Qoheleth." (Qoheleth is the Hebrew name for the implied author of the book, often translated "the Preacher.") We see "Fear God Qoheleth" in the book's ending, but the same pious strain also appears throughout. Distinct from this voice is "Seize-the-day Qoheleth," who proclaims that life is short and that we should grab all the gusto we can: "So I commend enjoyment for there is nothing better for people under the sun than to eat and drink and enjoy themselves" (Eccl 8:15).

The most prominent voice, the one most people remember, is "Pessimistic Qoheleth." This one sees no point or benefit in living, in the face of God's inscrutability and the inevitability of death: "So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind. I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun," (Eccl 2:17-18). Many debate whether Qoheleth is one author taking different sides in an argument, trying them out, or whether he advocates only one position. Or perhaps a pious editor tried to force Qoheleth's writings to conform to standard religious beliefs. This is one of those areas where we do not have enough information to know the answer to that question.

But pessimistic Qoheleth speaks most clearly to our age. He explores everything. He questions everything. And although I don't agree with all his conclusions, his intellectual and spiritual courage to look over the abyss should inspire and challenge us to do the same.

Ben Sira

Something happened after the writing of Ecclesiastes and before the formation of the other two wisdom books: *Hellenism*. In the fourth century B.C.E., Alexander the Great conquered the Eastern Mediterranean Basin and points east, including Palestine. His imposition of Greek language and Greek culture on his empire is what scholars refer to as "Hellenism." For Ben Sira, Hellenism constituted a challenge against Jewish identity, a temptation to the youth to forsake their ancestral religion and to emulate their conquerors.

In order to consolidate the Jewish resistance to foreign influence, Ben Sira employed the idea of woman wisdom from Proverbs and fully identified her with the Torah: "All this [Woman Wisdom] is the book of the covenant of the Most High God/ the law that Moses commanded us/as an inheritance for the congregation of Jacob" (Sir 24:23). In Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes there is no mention of the saving narratives of the Hebrew Bible, the ancestors, the exodus, or King David. But for Ben Sira, the divisions between prophet and sage can no longer separate the Jewish community. He embraced the primacy of Torah, the first five books of the Bible, which contain the narratives of the ancestors and the exodus, the "instruction" of Israel. Ben Sira transformed wisdom's orientation—he wanted them to know that they were Israelites first, sages second.

Wisdom of Solomon

Writing after Ben Sira and exclusively in Greek (not a translation from Hebrew), an anonymous writer (we call him Pseudo-Solomon) sought to integrate Greek culture and ideas into Jewish wisdom thinking and thus prove to his Greek readers that Israelite reflective thought was every bit as sophisticated and erudite as Greek philosophy.

In his most important contribution, he tackled the age-old wisdom conundrum regarding retribution, the conflict over the contention that a just God dispenses appropriate rewards and punishment. The experience of an honest observer attests, however, that many innocent people suffer, while wicked, selfish predators get off with scarcely a scratch. Pseudo-Solomon borrowed Greek ideas not available to earlier sages. Here is his solution to the problem of evil: if people don't get what they deserve before they die, all accounts will be reckoned in the afterlife. "After they die, the righteous will receive their reward and recompense in heaven"; "Their hope is full of immortality" (2:4b), he asserts. "The faithful will abide with [God] in love" (2:9b).

Previously, the Israelite writers spoke seldom and with great restraint and ambiguity about what happens after death. Some gave a suggestion of hope, such as Job when he said: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth" (Job 19:25). Others are downright skeptical of any afterlife. Pseudo-Solomon spun a story to express what he believed. In his story, a good person encounters a group of selfish, dishonest liars and murderers. They decide that the presence of this do-gooder made them look bad, so they murder him, all the while mocking and challenging

him: "Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions" (Wis 2:12).

Much to the surprise of these evil persons, at some unspecified time in the future, whether before or after their death is not stated, they see the good person in the presence of angels, and they realize, too late, that the good man has received his reward, and the evil ones would receive their consequences: "Then the righteous will stand with great confidence/ In the presence of those who have oppressed them/ And those who make light of their labors" (Wisdom 5:1). All belief in monotheistic religions in an afterlife of rewards and punishment stems from Pseudo-Solomon, whose reflections are shaped by his exposure to Greek philosophical teaching on the soul. The sages, always curious about other cultures, embraced what they found useful in Hellenism.

Conclusion

What follows is a summary of the worldview of the wisdom books. Some of these observations conflict with each other simply because the sages themselves collide with each other. The wisdom books are the site of this conflict. Wisdom is:

- 1) Anthropocentric: The sages believed that humans who honestly scrutinize their world can discern the divine secrets. The human perspective thus gains access into the divine mind. The prophets, in contrast, believed that God gives divine knowledge to select humans thorough dreams, visions, ecstasy, and divine appearance.
- 2) Optimistic: The wisdom enterprise bases itself on these two basic beliefs: that the universe makes sense—things happen for reasons, and those reasons make sense; that humans actually are able, through diligent attention, to figure out the workings of the universe.
- 3) Skeptical and doubting: The sages (some of them, anyway) felt outrage because their expectation was that the universe should make sense, but in their experience it did not. So the sages, on the basis of their experience (no. 1), challenged the rationality of their universe and challenged the justice of God.

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