

Introduction to Wisdom Literature

I. What is Wisdom Literature?

A. Characteristics

1. Absence of explicit references to major Israelite themes: Covenant, election, promises to the patriarchs, the Exodus, Moses, etc.
2. Types of Wisdom¹
 - a. Practical Wisdom - Deals with practical wisdom gained from observation and experience
 - b. Judicial Wisdom - Deals with the execution of justice
 - c. Theological Wisdom - Deals with puzzling issues, such as the suffering of the righteous
3. Wasn't concerned with "changing" the natural order, but preserving or living in harmony with it
 - a. There was no room for "fads"
 - b. Wisdom is old, tested, and tried
 - c. Wisdom has been passed down by the sages
 - d. Wisdom ultimately comes from God
4. Often rooted in at least one of two theologies
 - a. Creation Theology
 - 1) God has created an orderly universe with both a natural and moral law.
 - 2) Wisdom seeks to discern and live in harmony with that law.
 - b. Retribution Theology - Going against God's order will result in retribution
5. Use of symbolism - Often uses metaphors or vivid imagery
 - a. Woman wisdom and Woman folly in Proverbs 1-9.
 - b. Path/way, right hand, heart, animals, etc.
 - c. Monsters²

¹ Barry Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995), 426-427.

² Some of the monsters mentioned in Hebrew wisdom literature are "Tannin" in Job 7:12; "Rahab" in Job 9:13; 26:12; "Yam" in Job 7:12; 26:12; 38:8; Behemoth in Job 40:15; and Leviathan in Job 3:8; 41:1. Some of these monsters are mentioned in other Hebrew poetry as well as in some prophetic oracles. The use of these monsters in Biblical literature would be similar to our modern use of the word "dragon," as in saying, "He battled the dragon," which does not affirm the existence of a dragon, but is a vivid, metaphorical way of portraying a battle against an evil force.

B. Hebrew Wisdom Literature

1. Inspired, authoritative works
 - a. Job
 - b. Proverbs
 - c. Ecclesiastes
 - d. Habakkuk
 - e. The Joseph Stories in Genesis
 - f. The narrative portions of Daniel
 - g. "Wisdom" Psalms. eg: 1, 19, 32, 37, 49, 73...
2. Non-Biblical works
 - a. Wisdom of Solomon
 - b. Ben Sirach

II. The Nature of Wisdom

A. The Hebrew חָכְמָה, - *hkm* root

1. Noun - חָכְמָה - *hokmah*
 - a. Wisdom, skill, shrewdness, learning, ability
 - b. Examples:
 - 1) Exo 31:3
 - 2) Dan 1:4, 17, 20
 - 3) Psa 104:24; 111:10
 - 4) Isa 10:13
 - 5) Ezek 28:4, 5, 7, 12, 17
2. Adjective - חָכָם - *hākām*
 - a. Wise, skilled, prudent, shrewd, crafty, wise man
 - b. Examples:
 - 1) Exo 7:11; 31:6; 36:1,2,8
 - 2) Deut 1:13; 4:6
 - 3) Jer 4:22; 8:8,9
 - 4) Ezek 27:8,9
 - c. Jer. 18:18; Ezek 7:26
 - 1) Apparently, the wise man, (or sage) was one of at least three authoritative figures in Israel who communicated God's truth in various ways.
 - 2) The Torah was the specialization of the Priest
 - 3) Counsel/advice was the specialization of the Sage (חָכָם)
 - 4) The divine word was the specialization of the Prophet
3. Verb - חָכַם - *hākam*
 - a. To be wise, act wisely, make wise, deal wisely
 - b. Examples:
 - 1) Exo 1:10
 - 2) Psa 19:7; 119:98

- B. Biblical “wisdom” refers to an educated discipline or a specialized skill³
 - 1. Could be a reference to a technical skill, a trade, a soldier, etc.
 - 2. Could be a reference to skill at life
- C. Wisdom has existed from the beginning and is changeless

III. The Growth of Israel’s Wisdom Movement

- A. Associated with Solomon
- B. 1 Kings 3:1-14; 1 Kings 4:29-34
 - 1. God endowed Solomon with great wisdom so he could rule justly
 - 2. Solomon became famous for his wisdom
- C. Solomon’s names are attached to several wisdom books
 - 1. Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1
 - 2. Songs 1:5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11, 12 (Song of Songs may be better classified as love poetry rather than wisdom literature)

IV. Technical Characteristics of Proverbial Wisdom

- A. מָשָׁל - “*Māsāl*” - Usually translated “proverb” or “by word” has a much wider meaning than the English word, “Proverb”⁴
 - 1. Similitudes: Ezek 16:44; Gen 10:9; 1 Sam 10:11
 - 2. Popular Sayings: Jer 23:28; 31:29; 1 Sam 24:13; Isa 32:6; 1 Kng 20:11
 - 3. Literary aphorisms: Prov 10:1-22:16, 25-29; Qoh 9:19-10:20
 - 4. Taunt Songs: Isa 14:4; Mic 2:4; Hab 2:6-8; Ezek 12:22-23; 18:2-3
 - 5. Bywords: Deut 28:37; 1 Kings 9:7; Jer 24:9; Ezek 14:8
 - 6. Allegories: Ezek 17:1-10; 20:45-49; 24:3-14
 - 7. Discourses: Num 23:7, 18; 24:3-24; Job 27:1; 29:1; Ps 49:4; 78:2
- B. Use of Parallelism
 - 1. Synonymous - Shows comparisons and similarities
 - Example: Prov 16:18; 28:3, 15
 - 2. Antithetical - Shows contrasts

³ Gerald T. Sheppard, “Wisdom,” In *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Chicago: Eerdmans, 1988), 4:1076.

⁴ James Crenshaw, “Wisdom,” In *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995), 49.

Example: Prov 10:1, 5, 7; 15:1

3. Synthetic - Second line supplements or completes the first

Example: Prov 18:8

4. Juxtaposition - Placing two phrases together without verbs

Examples:

- a. Prov 12:1 - Lover of discipline - lover of knowledge

- b. Prov 15:32 literally:

Spurner of discipline - despiser of his soul

And

Hearer of reproof - acquirer of heart

- C. Use of Chiasm - a-b, b-a pattern or a-b-c, c,b,a etc.

- Prov 3:10 in Hebrew word order

They will be full

Your barns

with grain

And

With wine

Your vats

Will overflow

- D. Use of Assonance - Words that sound good together

1. "Look before you leap" Note the "L" sound

2. "He who hesitates is lost" Note the "H, S and T" sounds

- E. Use of Alliteration - Prov 31:10-31 - Goes from א to ת, the Hebrew alphabet

V. Proverbial Forms⁵

- A. Typically short and pithy. It is "compressed experience" that cannot and should not be taken in large doses⁶

- B. The saying

1. Observational and experiential - Example: Prov 10:30; 13:12; 14:3

- a. Doesn't try to make an admonition

- b. Simply states an observed or experienced fact

- c. Use of this statement is a next step

2. Didactic Saying

- a. Designed to promote an ideal or action

- b. Example: Prov. 14:3

3. Value judgment - Prov. 10:30

- C. Admonition

⁵ Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2nd ed, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 7-13.

⁶ C. Hassell Bullock, "The Book of Proverbs," In *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 20.

1. This openly warns or urges to a particular attitude or action
2. Example: Prov. 22:22-23

D. Types of Sayings and Admonitions

1. The good saying - Something is good, or not good - Prov. 19:2
2. The better saying - Something is better (Prov. 15:16; Eccl 7:5)
3. The numerical saying - Title line with a number and a list of items (Prov 30:24)
4. The abomination saying - (Prov. 11:1)
5. The blessed saying - (Prov 28:14)
6. The *a fortiori* saying - Conclusion from an assertion accepted by all (Prov 15:11)

E. Hymn and Prayer⁷

1. There may be a distinction between the sage, who describes things as they are, and the poet, who uses hyperbole
2. Examples:
 - a. Prov. 1:20-33; 8
 - b. Job 28
 - c. Psalm 1, 32, 34, 37, 49, 112, 127, 128
3. Stylistic features to identify wisdom Psalms:
 - a. אֲשֶׁרִי formula - "O the blessedness of..."
 - b. Numerical Sayings
 - c. Better Sayings
 - d. Address of a teacher to a "son"
 - e. Alphabetic Structure
 - f. Simple Comparisons and admonitions
 - g. Rhetorical Questions
4. Thematic features
 - a. Contrast between the רָשָׁע wicked and the צַדִּיק righteous
 - b. The two ways
 - c. Preoccupation with the problem of retribution
 - d. Practical advice about conduct
 - e. Fear of the Lord
 - f. Special wisdom vocabulary, such as מָשָׁל proverb, בִּינָה understanding, חֵידָה riddle, חֲכָמָה wisdom.

VI. General Characteristics of Proverbial Wisdom

A. Statement of a general truth

1. English example - Are these contradictory?
 - a. "To many cooks spoil the broth"
 - b. "Many hands make light work"

⁷ Crenshaw, 62.

2. Biblical Example:
 - a. Prov. 26:4-5
 - b. Are these contradictory?
3. Observation - Proverbs are not universally valid
 - a. Prov. 15:23
 - b. Eccl. 3:1-8

B. Proverbial wisdom is not useful for everyone

1. Prov. 26:7, 9
2. A wise person knows when to apply a proverb and not to
3. The fool will apply a proverb indiscriminately
 - a. A proverb does not help a fool to walk wisely
 - b. A proverb may even be dangerous in the hands of a fool

VII. How a Proverb Works (a fun exercise - create a proverb)

An old ballpoint pen in a white shirt pocket ...

Dad's avocado leisure suit and disco records...

An overripe banana...

An 8-track player in the garage...