

Series Introduction: The Wise King

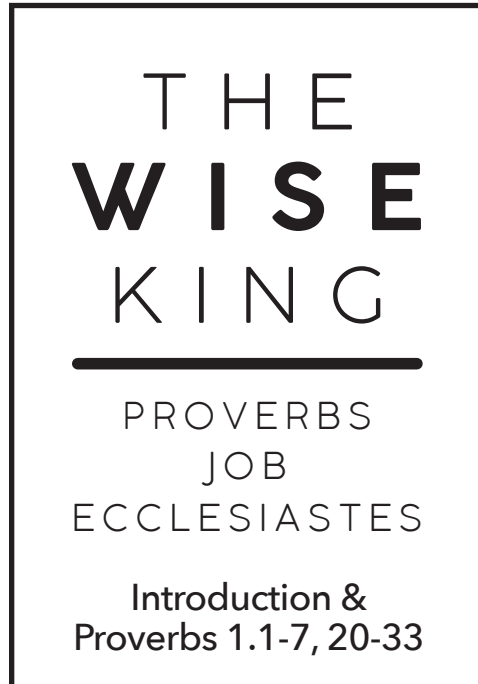
In our study of Samuel and Kings, we witnessed what happened when Israel exchanged God's Kingship for "a king like the nations" (1 Samuel 8.5). In God's faithfulness, God sent Israel into exile and while Jerusalem was eventually resettled (539BCE-74CE), until 1948CE chosen people found themselves under kings and emperors of other nations. Yet despite Israel's faithlessness that led to exile and the destruction of the promised land, Scripture affirms that God remained King over Israel - both the land and its people - as well as King over the conquering nations and the entire cosmos. Having heard this response to the question, "Who is the King?", our study transitions to explore the nature of God's Kingship. "The Wise King" will take us through Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes - the "wisdom literature" of the Hebrew Bible - which call us to meditate on God's Wisdom and what it might mean to live as God's people before a watching world.

What is Wisdom?

Our common sense approach to wisdom imagines a person with shrewd intellect and strong moral character who with stability and integrity makes sound decisions in the course of the messiness of life. A more theoretical or spiritual approach sees wisdom as a quality of knowledge that transcends the ordinary in the pursuit of understanding and thriving. Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes understand wisdom as both a theological and ethical reality. Theologically, Wisdom finds its source in God and God infuses Creation with Wisdom. As people seek Wisdom, which Scripture encourages us to do, God calls us first to seek God. In that pursuit, Creation serves as a witness and guide to point us in the right direction, since Wisdom is inscribed into all things. In the course of seeking and finding God and comprehending Wisdom, our heart, soul, mind and actions are conformed to what we discover; that is, an ethics results in the course of the theological quest for Wisdom.

So, against our more theoretical and spiritual approaches, Wisdom is attainable as a gift God reveals as we pursue Wisdom. But, against our more common sense approaches, we can only embody the Wisdom God graces us with in our quest. Wisdom can be lived out, articulated and shared in books like Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes (and in other places in Scripture...and beyond), but God's

Wisdom always transcends our present understanding of Wisdom. And our expressions of Wisdom serve less as fact and more like pointers for others on the same quest for Wisdom. Our study of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes invites us to join this worthwhile quest, knowing that concrete answers to the question, "What is Wisdom?", will come, but will be difficult to establish in any absolute, eternal sense.



What is Wisdom Literature?

According to Roland E. Murphy (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume VI, p. 920) the Hebrew Bible uses the term for wisdom 318 times. Over half of these uses (183 to be exact) are found in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. The sheer frequency of the word and the function wisdom plays in each established these books as the literary core of the genre of wisdom in biblical (and more broadly ancient near eastern) studies. Similar writings in content and style are found in portions of other books of the Hebrew Bible (Psalms, for instance), in the New Testament (James), in other Jewish writings (Wisdom of Ben-Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon), among the Egyptians, in Mesopotamia, and even among Hellenistic

writers. Wisdom literature is generally characterized by its poetic structure, didactic tone, and theological-moral intent. Some contemporary scholars question whether people in the ancient near east would recognize "wisdom literature" as a discrete literary genre. However, there is no question that the pursuit of wisdom pervades Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, and that they function in the Hebrew Bible in every era as a renewed cry to seek wisdom as part of a faithful way of being in the world.

Proverbs: A Brief Introduction

The opening word of Proverbs tells us what to anticipate: "The *misle* (*masal*) of Solomon." *Masal* means "proverb" or "parable". In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible produced in c. 200 BCE (the Septuagint (LXX)), the scribe rendered *masal* as *paroimiai*, which is "a by-word, common saying, proverb, maxim," (*Liddell & Scott*) and is closely related to the word "parable." Proverbs 10-31 pays out on these expectations, being a compilation of short, pithy proverbial statements attributed to Solomon (961-921BCE), the Egyptian wisdom text *The Instruction of Amenemope* (c. 1000-600BCE), the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah (729-686BCE), Agur son of Jakeh (un-

known) and King Lemuel (unknown). The first section of Proverbs (1-9) is an introduction to this collection of wisdom sayings that opens with a prologue (1.1-7) and continues with a lengthy poetic invitation to pursue wisdom and flee foolishness (1.8-9.18).

Proverbs opens with a superscription that attributes its authorship to Solomon. While some of the proverbs in the collection likely originate with King Solomon in either written or oral form, the inclusion of other wisdom collections from later eras obviously indicates that King Solomon couldn't have had any direct involvement in the final form of the book of Proverbs. As we know from other ancient texts, it was common practice to attribute writings to ancient figures as a way to connect the writing with their theology, to honor the memory of an ancient figure, or to lend authority to the writing. Proverbs is likely compiled by later sages over time, coming together in its current form some time after Israelite worship is once again established in Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile during the Second Temple period around the third-century BCE. A date in this era (or maybe even beyond) is likely since the manuscript traditions of the Septuagint (c. 200BCE) and Masoretic Text (1000CE) diverge in content and in the arrangement of chapters 24-30. This demonstrates that in the second and third centuries BCE there are likely variant manuscripts of Proverbs in circulation. Unfortunately the very fragmentary manuscript evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls cannot provide much of a first-century CE perspective on Proverbs to help us determine a better date.

As we engage Proverbs it is important to keep its grounding in the wisdom tradition, its poetic nature, and its general social-historical context in mind. As wisdom literature, Proverbs invites us to pursue Lady Wisdom and avoid Lady Folly (1-9). Proverbs understands that the Lord is the source of all wisdom (8) and presents its collected wisdom as an ancient but proven testing ground for wise thought and action (10-31). As poetry, Proverbs uses parallelisms, parables, alliteration, word-play, acrostic forms, evocative imagery, and strained semantic categories to point the hearer toward pathways along which prior sages discovered Wisdom. As poetry, Proverbs sometimes leaves us mystified as to its meaning because as it strains to grasp the Wisdom it seeks to articulate, language fails. And when proverbs are difficult to translate, we are reminded again that Proverbs invites us on a journey of continued insight into Wisdom and is not itself the destination. The origin of Proverbs among people seeking Wisdom across different eras and places brings a comprehensive nature to its insights, but also locates these insights within a particular range of social and historic experience. We certainly live in the same cosmos as these sages, but our postmodern Western urban context may make it difficult

to grasp a proverb or to find the same quality of Wisdom in its insights.

Temper Longman III notes that a proverb "does not teach a universally valid truth. On the contrary proverbs are true only if stated at the right time and in the right circumstance" (*Proverbs*, 31). We have often approached Proverbs as a book of "principles" or universal maxims that speak eternal, unwavering truths valid for every person in every place and in every time. As is evident from the nature of Wisdom described above and the collection of proverbs we find in the Hebrew Bible, Proverbs is written into and out of particular theological, historical and social contexts. Some verses in Proverbs have endured in effectively pointing the way to Wisdom, having this quality of universal truth. Others are nearly impossible to translate because they are so embedded in their culture and provide so few connections that we end up filling in content in translation that may lead us away from its original intention (for example, Proverbs 20.17). So, as we study Proverbs together we must read wisely in regard to the ongoing quest for Wisdom we participate in with the text and in regard to remembering the essential distance between this particular text and ourselves as readers.

Wisdom's Welcome: Proverbs 1.1-7, 20-33

Proverbs 1.1-7

Proverbs opens with an introduction (1.1-7) that frames the intention of the book.

The superscription (1.1), which was discussed at length in the Introduction, cues the reader to the genre of Proverbs (*misle/masal/paroimai/parabole*) and ties the book to King Solomon. Verses 2-3 elucidate the general purpose of these collected proverbs: "to know wisdom and discipline; to understand insightful sayings; to receive the teaching of insight, righteousness, justice and virtue." Wisdom was discussed in the Introduction and the editor intends Proverbs to confront the hearer with Wisdom its theological and practical dimensions. The word "discipline" can also mean "teaching," but implicates the corrective that is often essential for the learner who fails to comprehend. 1.2b intends that by studying Proverbs the hearer will arrive at the same level of understanding as the person who spoke or wrote the proverb. By this mechanism, the hearer is both welcomed and moved forward on the journey toward Wisdom. 1.3 extends the didactic intent of Proverbs to discipline hearers toward ethical living characterized by prudence ("insight" into wise living), righteousness, justice and moral uprightness ("virtue"). The connection of Wisdom and righteousness are important for Proverbs and will remain significant throughout our study of the Wisdom tradition.

Proverbs 1.4 targets its intentions toward the “simple.” The simple are teachable persons who are not yet formed enough to be either wise or foolish. These people are often “young” as the parallelism in the verse suggests. To these young simpletons, the sages seek to give prudence, knowledge and discretion. A second audience, the wise, are targeted in 1.5-6, highlighting that even those already on the journey toward Wisdom can learn and find guidance from a careful hearing of Proverbs. Because these people have already attained some wisdom, Proverbs can give insight into the enigmatic things said by the sages in its pages. Proverbs 1.4-7 opens the text out to all who may come - although apparently those who are already fools may find the way ahead difficult - but warns the hearer that (1) a desire for learning and wisdom are required and (2) that deepening insight will be required to comprehend the enigmatic words of the sages.

The introduction closes with the theme of Proverbs: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (1.7, repeated again in 9.10 and also in other forms throughout the book). “The fear of the Lord” speaks to the relationship of the hearer to the God revealed in the story of Israel (and for our purposes, the Church). The journey toward Wisdom fails from the beginning if the Lord is not the point of reference for comprehending Wisdom, knowledge, instruction, righteousness, justice, moral living...or really anything the hearer might pursue in the course of life. Epistemologically speaking, this is a powerful claim that immediately excludes other pathways to Wisdom. This claim makes the inclusion of proverbs from Egypt in the collection even more fascinating and may open the possibility from the beginning that alternative pursuits for wisdom may “anonymously” lead back to God’s Wisdom by accident.

The word “fear” connotes an appropriate position of respect that comes from humanity’s dependence on its Lord and Creator. Any other posture in relation to the Lord will also thwart the quest for Wisdom. As noted in the Introduction to Wisdom, since God is The Wise King, and is Wisdom’s source, the desire for Wisdom necessitates a humble approach to the Lord who is the only one who can bring about understanding. We do not wrest understanding and Wisdom from the cosmos; Wisdom is a gift that comes through revelation and gracious comprehension from the Lord. In 7b, Proverbs introduces the character of “the fool.” While the desire of Proverbs is the lead eager young simpletons and the wise toward “wisdom and instruction” (1.2), fools identify themselves from the beginning by their hatred of the quest and its insights. So, by negation Proverbs 1.7b highlights again the positive journey of Wisdom toward wisdom and instruction.

Proverbs 1.1-7 introduces all of the key themes that are woven throughout Proverbs. The editors appended these verses to the book as a fitting introduction to Proverbs in the same way other wisdom writers in the ancient near east introduced their collections of wisdom sayings.

Proverbs 1.20-33

[Note: In Proverbs 1.8-19 a father character appeals to his son about heeding parental wisdom. We will handle all of these “parental wisdom” sections in Week #4 of our study.]

In Proverbs 1.20-33, we are introduced to Lady Wisdom. The fact that we are dealing with personified wisdom is evident from the image conveyed by verses 20-21. The noun “wisdom” opens v. 20, but the verbs that follow and the personal pronoun in v. 20b indicate that we aren’t dealing with “wisdom” as a form of individual intellect or communal ethics. We have now encountered Wisdom embodied, deemed “Lady” Wisdom due to the gender of the Hebrew word. As noted in the Introduction, Wisdom does not exist independently from God. Later theologians will read Scriptures like Proverbs 1.20ff, Proverbs 8-9, Job 28 and other passages and declare that Wisdom exists as a separate cosmic entity in a hierarchy of spiritual beings. As with a Christian understanding of the Trinity, it is possible for there to be “many persons” and “one God.” Lady Wisdom is in just this way. And when we hear her speak, we are hearing the voice of the Lord God, the Wise King.

Lady Wisdom bursts onto the scene. Her voice rings from street corners, down major thoroughfares, around the city gates, and throughout the town square (20-21). She does not hide and she is not mysterious. Lady Wisdom is publicly available, she is bold, and, as it turns out, she is upset. It appears that the young simpletons (22a), mockers/scoffers (22b) and fools (22c) are continuing in their ways. She calls them to repent (23a, “turn back, return”) in response to her spirit (ruach) that she pours out on them (23b) and the words she makes known to them (23c). To this point, these three groups of people have rejected her advances (24-25). As a result, Wisdom will let them suffer the consequences of spurning her advances. In fact, she will “mock” (26b) them in the same way they mock/scoff her. She will laugh in the face of the calamities they face because they did not heed her voice. (26a). When “terror” (26b), anguish and distress inevitably come upon them and they cry out to Lady Wisdom, she will “not answer” (28a) and will hide (28b). When Lady Wisdom called out and made herself available, the simpletons, mockers/scoffers and fools rejected her. Now that they cry out in public, Lady Wisdom will reverse her position, being silent and private.

Proverbs 1.29-31 spells out the rationale for her judgment. As noted earlier, the character of Lady Wisdom is the Lord God. So, because these people did not properly acknowledge their relationship with the Lord and did not heed the words Wisdom cried out or revealed by her spirit, they will not receive the things that come from heeding the word of the Lord, which will be discussed in other sections of Proverbs. Rather, they will reap the results of the unwise courses they are charting and the Lord will not intervene. There is no sense in Wisdom's address that allowing these people to suffer the consequences of their decisions is done to move them to repentance. In fact, Lady Wisdom's silence and hiddenness appears to be final. Wisdom's stance toward the unrepentant is underscored in what follows.

Lady Wisdom's opening address closes by drawing a contrast between those who receive her advances and the rejection of the simpleton and the fool. Those who "listen to me" (33a) will live with assurance of the Lord's care and not in the "dread of evil." (33b). However, the young simpletons who are happy in their simplicity and do not pursue wisdom will die (32a), and the fools who are content with their foolishness will be destroyed by their foolishness (32b). Her opening salvo in Proverbs serves as an urgent warning to everyone to pursue Wisdom by demonstrating the consequences for those who spurn her advances.

Conclusion

The introduction of Proverbs and our initial encounter with Lady Wisdom prepare us well for the journey ahead. In the second lesson of this series, we will get to know Lady Wisdom better and unpack more thoroughly ideas addressed in the Introduction to Wisdom and Proverbs.

Supplementary Readings

Reviewing this study guide should provide the necessary perspective to help you prepare for the first week of our study, *The Wise King*. However, these resources are available online at the link that was sent by email at the beginning of our study. If you no longer have the email, email Carl Flynn at carlflynn@me.com and I will send it along.

IVPDictionaryProverbs.pdf

An excellent, thorough set of introductory articles on Proverbs from the *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*. Downers Grove, Ill. : Nottingham, England: IVP Academic, 2008.

BrownCharacterinCrisis.pdf

A chapter that focuses on the introductory section of Proverbs and a few other important passages from William P. Brown's seminal study on wisdom literature, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.