

“The Wise King” surveyed a portion of the Hebrew Bible that, apart from Proverbs, often goes unread in many Christian circles. As we made our way through Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes over the past few months, you may have experienced part of the reason we are reticent to study wisdom literature. This portion of Scripture takes us into places that are easier to avoid in polite conversation. While Proverbs seeks some clarity about what qualifies as wisdom and what foolishness looks like, Job and Ecclesiastes muddy the waters. Proverbs paints a scandalous picture of Lady Folly and points us toward Wisdom using metaphors that some might find uncomfortable. Job engages the problem of unjust suffering and entertains the challenging question of whether we worship and serve God simply because God is God or because of God’s blessings. Ecclesiastes takes us on a philosophical quest into deep questions of the value of human being and the meaning of human existence, and what Qohelet discovers calls into question some of our deeply held assumptions about life.

To conclude our study, will take a look at four “wisdom psalms” as a way to summarize key themes that surfaced during our journey. Hebrew Bible scholars debate whether “wisdom psalms” exist. However, what is clear is that Psalms 1, 19, 73, and 112 reflect the central themes that surface in wisdom literature. So, while these psalms may not have been written during the time of Proverbs, Job or Ecclesiastes and likely do not come from the same writers or editors, they certainly share a similar theological vision. Having explored these general themes, we will move through the four Psalms with an eye toward their connection with and summary of our journey into knowing “The Wise King.”

## Wisdom Themes

### *Wisdom vs. Foolishness*

Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes reflect a concern for discerning wisdom from foolishness and this theme resonates through these four psalms. The controlling theme in Proverbs is discerning between wisdom and folly. For Job, he pursues his case with wisdom (against the folly of his friends) to demonstrate the injustice that has befallen him and to establish his righteousness. The polarity be-

tween righteousness and sin that governs Job’s sparring with his friends parallels that of wisdom and foolishness throughout Job and it is the tension between these two opposites that drives the narrative. For Ecclesiastes, Qohelet encourages the pursuit of wisdom and avoidance of folly while observing throughout that it is difficult for humans to discern between the two based on experience

“under the sun.” Psalms 1, 73 and 112 take up this theme and stress wisdom and righteousness over against foolishness and wickedness. As with wisdom literature, the two states are mutually exclusive of one another and define the quality of relationship between God and God’s creature.

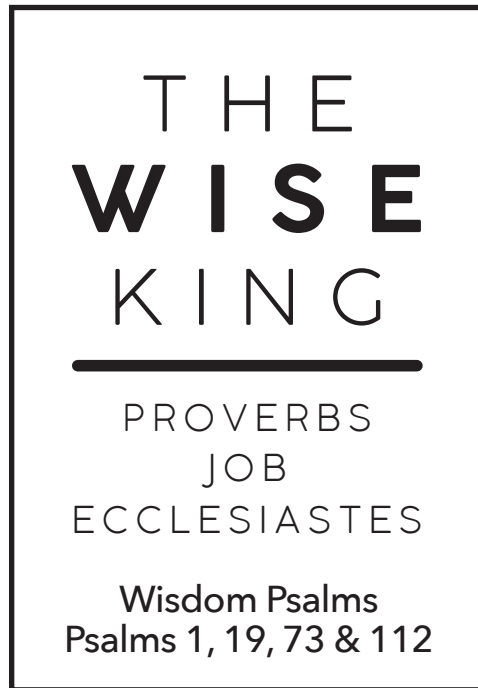
### *An Emphasis on Torah or the Commandments*

Proverbs leans upon both the commandments of the Lord and Torah to define the path of wisdom and righteousness. While Job engages courtroom imagery, the language of Torah and commandment are virtually absent from his cry for justice before the Lord. The final editor of Ecclesiastes makes a final appeal to the hearer to “keep the commandments” along with Qohelet’s encouragement to “fear God.” For wisdom literature,

Torah and God’s commandments are controlling ideas that frame both the quest and understanding of wisdom. Psalms 1, 19 and 112 name the Torah and the commandments as a source of delight for the faithful, wise person.

### *God’s Wisdom vs. Human Wisdom*

A similar theme to wisdom and foolishness, the contrast between God’s wisdom and human wisdom is obvious in both Job and Ecclesiastes. For Job, the narrative turns on the lack of wisdom apparent in the reasoning of the friends, Elihu, and even of Job. Qohelet is quick to discern between the superiority of God’s wisdom and the absolute fallibility and folly that extends from human wisdom. In fact, it is God’s wisdom that makes human wisdom both a possibility and at the same time foolishness. Proverbs has as its goal instruction in God’s wisdom in contrast to human wisdom which is in essence folly. Psalm 73 draws a clear contrast between God’s counsel/wisdom and human ways of knowing expressed as wickedness. Likewise, Psalm 19 sees God’s wisdom in creation and Torah over against the human tendency to reason based on human ways of seeing and knowing. The wise see and hear God’s wisdom and conform themselves to it over against human wisdom.



## *The Fear of the Lord*

Qohelet calls his hearers to “fear the Lord” as his primary insight that grounds a substantial human existence. Proverbs resonates with Ecclesiastes in its claim that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (1.7). Job affirms in chapter 28 that “the fear of the Lord is wisdom” (28.28). This threadline weaves through Psalm 19 in its affirmation that “the fear of the Lord is pure” and Psalm 112 with its exclamation, “happy are those who fear the Lord.” In each case, proper consideration of God’s power and position relative to God’s creatures is the proper, first acknowledgement in the journey toward wisdom.

## *The Value of Wisdom*

Both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes hold wisdom in high regard over against the whims of Lady Folly. Proverbs 8.11 and 16.16 place the value of wisdom over jewels, gold and silver. Qohelet sees wisdom “as good as an inheritance,” equates it to great wealth, and affirms that it gives great strength (7.11,12,19). Job resonates with wisdom’s high value, particularly in his reflections in chapter 28 where he says that “the price of wisdom is above pearls.” The four “wisdom psalms” do not use the word “wisdom,” but it is clear in each that the value of righteousness (1), the Law (19), God’s presence (73), and the fear of the Lord (112) are equal to that of wisdom. In each case, God is more highly valued and to be valued more highly than anything else within Creation.

## **Wisdom Psalms**

### *Psalm 1*

Psalms opens as Proverbs 1-9 by drawing a clear distinction between extremes. In Proverbs it is wisdom and folly, and in Psalms 1 it is righteousness (1.5-6) and wickedness. 1.3 imagines the righteous as a fruitful grove of trees that contrast the wicked who are like windblown chaff (1.4). The righteous “delight in the the Lord’s Torah” (1.2), but the wicked are excluded from the Lord’s presence and perish. Clearly the exhortation of Psalm 1 is to pursue righteousness and shun wickedness, in the same way as Proverbs encourages the embrace of Wisdom over Lady Folly. We hear in Psalm 1 several echoes from wisdom writings, including the characterization of the wicked as “scoffers,” which is a common motif in Proverbs. In addition, Psalm 1 echoes Ecclesiastes in its confidence that God’s final judgment is the arbiter between the just and the unjust. Psalm 1, then, affirms a categorical distinction that is clearly present in Proverbs, asserted by God’s appearance in Job, and necessary amidst the muddiness of human existence in Ecclesiastes.

## *Psalm 19*

Psalm 19 divides neatly into three sections: Creation (1-6), Torah (7-10), and Ethics (11-14). Verses 1-6 echo God’s creative Wisdom in Proverbs 8 and God’s rejoinder to Job in chapter 40 as Creation and God’s words are intertwined. In 19.1-4 the structures of Creation speak God’s voice in their own, quiet way and recount “God’s glory.” The sun’s arduous yet joyful pathway across the sky demonstrates God’s sustaining power present in Creation as one manifestation of the quiet “voice” that resounds throughout the cosmos (19.5-6). Torah and commandment as expressions of God’s immediate Word in Creation are celebrated in 19.7-10. As the sun marks its “perfect” course, so Torah is “perfect,” “sure,” “right,” and “clear.” As God enwraps Creation through the quiet word that permeates the cosmos, so Torah and commandment impacts God’s creatures by “reviving the soul,” “making the simple wise,” “rejoicing the heart,” and “enlightening the eyes.” Because Torah and commandment function like God’s creative Word, they are of enduring value (19.10). Because God’s Creative Word permeates the cosmos and comes to expression in Torah, God’s “servant” is “warned” and “keeps” Torah (19.11). And keeping Torah protects God’s servant from “faults” and from those who do not perceive and heed God’s Word (19.12-13). Finally, there is a desire expressed by David (1.1) that the “words” spoken by God’s servant so resonate with God’s Word that God finds them “favorable” (19.14), for God the Lord is the Psalmist’s “rock and redeemer” (19.14). Psalm 19 resonates strongly with the emphasis through wisdom literature of Creation as the foundational witness to the being, presence and power of the Lord God.

### *Psalm 73*

This psalm immediately connects with the wisdom tradition through the “stumbling” of the writer who is “envious of the arrogant” and the “prosperity of the wicked” (73.2-3). Qohelet repeatedly struggles with over the apparent evil “under the sun” that the wicked prosper while the righteous struggle. Unable to ultimately resolve the tension, he considers this among the many “vacuous” dimensions of human existence. As Qohelet wrestles, so the Psalmist struggles over what he perceives as an affront to God’s righteousness. In vv. 4-11 this tension plays out as the wicked are at once healthy, successful and praised in public while at the same time being prideful, violent, foolish, malicious, blasphemous and arrogant. So, the Psalmist summarizes, “Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase riches” while he has by contrast “in vain kept my heart clean” and is “plagued” and “punished” for being “innocent” (73.12-14). Once again, we hear distinct echoes of Ecclesiastes’ assessment of the

vanity of human life. And like Qohelet, the Psalmist comes around to the finality of God's judgment of humanity as an indictment of the unrighteous. The writer "went into the sanctuary of God" and it set his vision aright. What appears one way "under the sun" appears in a different light in the context of worship. What looked like success is actually "ruin" (73.18). What looked like health and happiness is really being "swept away utterly by terrors" (73.19). Like Job after being confronted by the Lord in the whirlwind, the Psalmist repents (73.22) and returns to the Lord affirming "God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (73.26). Resolving the initial tension, the psalm closes with a Proverbs-like distinction that imagines the perishing of the wicked and God as the "refuge" for the one who remains "near God" (73.27-28).

### *Psalm 112*

The final wisdom psalm echoes Psalm 1 by negation in its opening verse, "Happy are those who fear the Lord" (112.1). As opposed to Psalm 1, Psalm 112 marches in an affirmative direction, praising the righteous and only turning to the wicked in its final verse (112.10). Those who heed Qohelet and "fear the Lord" and follow the counsel of wisdom literature to "delight in his commandments" (112.1) enjoy a series of benefits. These same benefits echo throughout Proverbs and are attributed to those who pursue wisdom. The righteous have many descendants who are blessed with great wealth (112.2-3). They inspire other believers by being righteous, merciful, generous and just (112.4-5). They are secure in their identity before the Lord and are so resolute in their confidence in the Lord that they triumph over any foes (112.6-8). Because they are righteous, they help the poor and the outcast and are honored by their community for their generosity (112.9). In fact, this righteous person is so good that the wicked hate them (112.10), but their hatred "comes to nothing" because of the faithful resilience of God's faithful and, of course, God's faithfulness. The positive track record of the righteous person echoes Job as he rehearses the life he enjoyed prior to God's testing of Job's confidence in the Lord. In addition, this psalm parallels the wisdom tradition in its final delineation between the righteous and the wicked.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

As noted at the beginning, Hebrew Bible scholars differ on whether there is even such a thing as a "wisdom psalm." Among those who agree that wisdom thinking is present in some of the Psalter each offers a different list of psalms. We have demonstrated that the four psalms featured here make several, immediate connections with

wisdom literature and, as it turns out, they all appear in every list surveyed as part of this study.

As we conclude this study, a key question remains: In our exploration of "The Wise King," what have we discerned about wisdom and what does it mean to be wise? Wisdom literature and these psalms clearly point to God The Wise King as the source and sum of wisdom. Wisdom is present in Creation because God is Creator. Wisdom pursues us and desires us to follow because God the Spirit is among us and pursues us, calling us to God. God and Wisdom are one and the same, which informs the second portion of the question, "what does it mean to be wise?" To have wisdom is God's gift. Wisdom is not earned and it is not something that just naturally occurs with age. Wisdom only comes by following the Wise One, allowing Wisdom to permeate one's being, and then mirroring God's wisdom in word and action. Wisdom, then, is an incarnate act of God as by the Holy Spirit God shapes and forms human being into God's image expressed, again, in word and action. Being wise, then, is the lived expression of God's being so filling and permeating God's creature that its words and acts are seen by others as a witness to God, the Wise King. So, may be both pursue Wisdom and thereby desire to become wise.