Chapter Title: How Do We Read Wisdom Literature?

Book Title: Exploring the Bible
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Published by: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers. (2016)
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1b3t72g.14

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Chapter 12
How Do We Read Wisdom Literature?

What kind of world has God created, and how can we thrive in it? What is human well-being? How do we reach it? How can we make sense of life's adversities and anomalies? Who are the wise, and who are the foolish? And how finally do we transmit wisdom to younger generations? Although these may sound like modern questions, they are in fact the animating concerns of biblical wisdom literature.

When biblical scholars talk about wisdom literature, they are typically referring to Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes (aka Qoheleth), along with a number of psalms that feature wisdom themes (e.g., Psalms 37, 49, 73). While the book of James does share some features of these texts (e.g., Jas. 3:13–17), wisdom literature is more common in the Hebrew Bible than in the New Testament.

Up to this point, we've referred to wisdom literature as if it were a singular category. While it is true that wisdom texts orbit around a common set of questions, it would be incorrect to conclude that all wisdom literature responds to these questions in the same way. Like so much of the Bible, wisdom literature is theologically plural. To illustrate the plurality of wisdom literature, let's look at three texts, one from each of the three wisdom books: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.

Proverbs 7–8

Every text creates a symbolic world into which the reader is invited, and Proverbs 7–8 is no different. The world it creates is dominated by the voice
of a father, who speaks to his silent son with whom the reader is invited to identify. In the process of offering instruction, the father uses women as examples of wisdom and exemplars of foolishness. He represents not only the speech of women but also their lives, bodies, and actions. In service of defining and teaching wisdom, the father uses two female figures—Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly—to “define and secure the boundaries of the symbolic order of patriarchal wisdom.” That is, these female characters are seen strictly from the perspective of patriarchal power. It is a man’s perspective, and only a man’s perspective, that matters in Proverbs. Read in this manner, these chapters serve as a cogent reminder that all speech is always caught up in complex networks of power and privilege. We can never escape these networks, but we can be aware of them. And we can notice the way power and privilege works in a book like Proverbs, we can critique this perspective, and yet we can still learn something from these ancient and sometimes troubling texts. In other words, we can acknowledge the complexity of a biblical text, even question its vision while we still keep an open heart that these texts might yet lead us to insights that help us see something new. These texts might reveal the depth of the oppression we experience but also embedded perspectives of our own that might contribute to the oppression of others.

As we know, the Bible is embedded in culture, time, and space. And because of this, the Bible is subject to historical analysis and critical scrutiny. As readers, we are free to read these texts as products of ancient Near Eastern cultures. To read them in this way is to read them honestly and to take seriously the long and complicated process through which these texts emerged—a process, Christians affirm, that was inspired by God. And yet, as Christians, we can also affirm that these texts, like us, are among the many ways in which God uses finite, limited, and even sinful means to accomplish God’s work in the world.

With that said, let’s turn to Proverbs. With the voice of paternal authority, Proverbs 7–8 describes two women, Dame Folly and Lady Wisdom. The reader is urged to make Lady Wisdom an intimate companion. Her fruit is better than gold, and her paths are righteousness and justice (Prov. 8:19–20). But at all costs, the reader is told to avoid Dame Folly, the “strange woman” whose “smooth words” (Prov. 7:4–5) lead not only to the foolish life but also, more seriously, to death (Prov. 7:23). Proverbs concerns itself with life-and-death choices.
The paternal figure's teaching about the strange woman emerges out of his observation of the world. He has seen many a simple youth drawn to Dame Folly's house of love "at the time of night and darkness" (Prov. 7:9). With seductive words, she urges them to follow her into bed, where they will take their fill of love until morning (Prov. 7:13–20). The highly erotic nature of this description attempts to demonstrate the power of folly's temptation, likening it to a young person's urge for sexual encounters. While her words may sound sweet, the teacher says, the fool who follows her is "like a bird rushing into a snare, not knowing that it will cost him his life" (Prov. 7:23). Her house, in fact, "is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death" (Prov. 7:27).

Lady Wisdom, on the contrary, takes her stand on the heights, beside the way, and at the crossroads. Like Dame Folly, Lady Wisdom also calls out to potential pupils. But in contrast to Dame Folly, Lady Wisdom's words are noble, true, and prudent. Her teaching is the true strength of kings, rulers, and nobles (Prov. 8:15–16). And even though she is the bearer of "riches . . . honor . . . enduring wealth and prosperity" (Prov. 8:18), the reward of her teaching far exceeds wealth (Prov. 8:19). To choose wisdom is to choose life and life abundant. The wise person will have a long existence, an abundance of friends, good health, a house filled with children, and sufficient possessions to carry one through all of life's storms. These blessings are, for Proverbs, the good life.

Taken as a whole, the book of Proverbs imagines two kinds of people: the wise and the foolish. Or, to use the language of Proverbs 7–8, one can either follow Lady Wisdom to righteousness, truth, and knowledge, or one can follow Dame Folly to the "chambers of death" (Prov. 7:27). What happens, however, when one faithfully follows Lady Wisdom but still ends up with a life full of dreadful consequences? This is precisely the question driving the book of Job.

The Book of Job

Job is the paragon of wisdom. Job was "blameless and upright, and one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). He also experienced the benefits of a wise life, including abundant children and resources. Due to a heavenly conspiracy, however, Job is afflicted by "the satan." This character is not the devil of the New Testament or of modern popular
imagination but rather a regular member of God’s court who was charged with offering contrarian opinions. That is, the satan is a literary figure in a mythical court.

Job is given into the hands of the satan, and nearly all of the external markers of a wise life (e.g., wealth, children, health) are taken away. The traditional relationship between wisdom and blessing is hereby called into question. Job is wise and is the “greatest of all the people of the east” (Job 1:3), and yet he suffers unimaginable losses. But why:

Job insists throughout that he is innocent and undeserving of the suffering he is experiencing. But his friends, assuming that Job’s dreadful circumstances result from his sin, offer an array of contrary diagnoses. The first speech is from Eliphaz, one of Job’s friends:

Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?
As I have seen, those who plow iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same.
By the breath of God they perish,
and by the blast of his anger they are consumed. (Job 4:7–9)

Job replies by inviting his friends to find any sin in him:
But now, be pleased to look at me;
for I will not lie to your face.
Turn, I pray, let no wrong be done.
Turn now, my vindication is at stake.
Is there any wrong on my tongue?
Cannot my taste discern calamity? (Job 6:28–30)

Job and his friends go back and forth, with Job insisting on his innocence and his friends, in a variety of ways, insisting that he is in the wrong—until finally, God appears “out of the whirlwind” (Job 38:1). Job will, after all, get his day in court.

God takes Job on a whirlwind tour of creation, asking the broken Job a flurry of questions, all of which are centered on God’s work in creation:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
     or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
     and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? (Job 38:4–7)

God's lengthy speech to Job extends from 38:1 to 41:34. These speeches
are literally and theologically rich. One thing that comes through clearly,
however, is that humanity is not at the center of creation. In fact, creatures
exist that are more powerful than humans and that even mock or threaten
human existence. One thinks for instance of the ostrich, which “When
spreads its plumes aloft, it laughs at the horse and its rider” (Job 39:18).
And then there are Behemoth and Leviathan. Of Behemoth it is said,

It is the first of the great acts of God—
     only its Maker can approach it with the sword . . .
Even if the river is turbulent, it is not frightened;
     it is confident though Jordan rushes against its mouth.
Can one take it with hooks
     or pierce its nose with a snare? (Job 40:19, 23–24)

The chaos monster, Leviathan, is hymned by none other than God. The
hymn begins with a series of questions indicating humanity's utter weak-
ness before the powerful creature:

Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook,
     or press down its tongue with a cord?
Can you put a rope in its nose,
     or pierce its jaw with a hook?
Will it make many supplications to you?
     Will it speak soft words to you?
Will it make a covenant with you
     to be taken as your servant forever?
Will you play with it as with a bird,
     or will you put it on leash for your girls?
Will traders bargain over it?
     Will they divide it up among the merchants?
Can you fill its skin with harpoons,
     or its head with fishing spears?
Lay hands on it;
think of the battle; you will not do it again!
Any hope of capturing it will be disappointed;
were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it?
No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up.
Who can stand before it?
Who can confront it and be safe?
—under the whole heaven, who?

What kind of answer is this to Job’s many supplications, accusations, and questions? It is an answer that demonstrates that Job exists in a cosmos of creatures. Some of these creatures can be domesticated (Job 1:5), but some cannot and will continue to pose a threat to humanity (e.g., Leviathan and Behemoth). There are forces of chaos in this world that, despite human morality, despite human civilization, will nonetheless break out in profoundly destructive ways. Job finally accepts that reality and his place in it. And now knowing the risks of a world inhabited by Behemoth and Leviathan, he nonetheless chooses to exercise profound courage by having children again (Job 42:13–14).

Ecclesiastes 2

The last set of texts we want to explore are from Ecclesiastes 2. Here, the teacher relates a numbers of life experiments he did to determine how “to appraise wisdom and to appraise madness and folly” (Eccl. 1:17). Ultimately, he is interested in knowing “what was good for mortals to do under heaven during the few days of their life” (Eccl. 2:3). He begins by saying to himself, “Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself” (Eccl. 2:1). He pursues this experiment by seeking pleasure in a whole range of activities and acquisitions:

- Wine (v. 3)
- Building houses, planting vineyards, and creating idyllic settings (vv. 4–5)
- A labor force that works for him (v. 7, 8)
- Livestock (v. 7)
- Silver and gold (v. 8)
- Delights of the flesh (v. 8)
- Concubines (v. 8)
Greatness (v. 9)

Wisdom (v. 9)

Whatever his eyes desired (v. 10)

Toil (v. 10)

Looking back on his lavish royal life and reflecting on "all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it," he concludes that "all was vanity and chasing after the wind, and there was nothing gained under the sun" (Eccl. 2:11).

Finding nothing but folly, he turns now to the topics of "wisdom and madness and folly" (Eccl. 2:12). He concludes that "wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness" (Eccl. 2:13). And yet, "the same fate befalls all of them" (that is, wise and foolish alike, Eccl. 2:14). Both the wise and the foolish die. Neither escapes death, and both will eventually be forgotten (Eccl. 2:15–16). One’s toil, moreover, is also vanity and chasing after the wind, because it will be enjoyed by others, who may be wise or foolish. In despair, he cries, "What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest" (Eccl. 2:22–23).

Closed in and frustrated on every side by futility and mortality, Qoheleth finally stumbles upon an insight, one that embraces the pleasures of life but recognizes these as gifts of God. "There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" (Eccl. 2:24). Qoheleth’s conclusions about the fleeting nature of pleasure are correct, so one should enjoy the pleasurable gifts of God while one has them.

Reflecting Theologically on Wisdom Literature

At the heart of wisdom literature is exploration of the world, not for its own sake, but for the sake of learning how to live prudently and successfully in God’s world. And although thoroughly ancient in their methods, certain wisdom texts approach the world in ways that will resonate among modern people. For example, Ecclesiastes employs experimentation, and Proverbs leans heavily on observational insight, even observation of the animals (Prov. 30:24–31). Wisdom literature does not typically come from visions,
heavenly voices, or angels but rather from human reflection on the world. While none of these texts are properly scientific or modern, they nonetheless share with modernity an appreciation for the human capacity to distill wisdom from observation or experimentation on the perceptible world.

The underlying theological assumption of most wisdom literature is that God has created a world whose patterns and structures are comprehensible and accessible to human inquiry. Lady Wisdom, to use the language of Proverbs, was there from the beginning (Prov. 8:22–36), and her ways are apparent even today, especially to those who fear the Lord (Prov. 1:7). To embrace wisdom is to embrace life, and to ignore wisdom is to choose death (Prov. 8:36). And the only prerequisite to such wisdom is that one must be willing to listen.

And yet, the world is not simply there to be comprehended, discovered, and in turn exploited. Sometimes the world pushes back. Israel's sages make space for forces that cannot be contained or subdued by human hands (e.g., Behemoth and Leviathan in Job 40–41). The world is overflowing with insight, but it is also dangerous; the world is not made for humans alone.

Wisdom literature is stunningly universal in its scope. And this is not only because it is grounded in creation but also because it generally lacks reference to Israel's own national story or experience. Keep in mind that one of the greatest figures of wisdom, Job, is not an Israelite, but rather a man from "Uz" (Job 1:1). Job is every person, and the lessons he learns belong to all of us.

Notes

2. Ibid.
6. The divine speeches at the end of Job are an important exception to this statement (Job 38–41).