

Introduction to the Bible [series 5]

The Books of Wisdom or Writings [Ketubim]

In the bible, wisdom literature consists of the books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, the Wisdom of Solomon, Tobit [a sapiential short story], Song of Songs, and the Psalms. According to some scholars the whole Bible speaks about wisdom and life. Genesis 37-50 presents Joseph, a man of wisdom, rising to prominent position in the court of Pharaoh due to his skills to interpret dreams. The Jewish Bible places the wisdom literature in the third section of the TaNaK [Torah, Nebiim, and Ketubim]. These books are concerned with practical wisdom: learning how to live well, how to perform one's tasks and how to understand the secrets of the universe. Wisdom is intimately united with God!

Main Teachings of Wisdom Books in the Bible

The central teaching of all wisdom books is that God created the world, within which humankind must learn to live. Through wisdom human beings can cope with the world and live happy and successful lives. Wisdom authors highlight the two ways before man: the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked.

- God: the Hebrew word *Elohim* is a common name used for God in wisdom books. God is called the Almighty who creates and sustains the universe. God's will is final and he brings to completion all human endeavors.
- Cosmic Order: Wisdom books teach that there is divinely established order in the universe. The orderly activity of a colony of ants is given as an example for purposeful human activity [Proverb 6:6-11]; Job claims that he is a righteous man but has not seen any order in the universe; it is refuted by Yahweh [God] and shows him the order in the inanimate and animate spheres [Job 38:2]. There are always reasons for divine actions in the universe. The way the world functions is closely associated with Yahweh's will.
- Creation: Yahweh creates the world, sets boundaries and arranges everything to obey his commands [Sirach 16:26-28]. *Though creation includes human beings, their obedience is not automatic but given freely to the creator.* Man's destiny is designed at creation to attain union with God [Wisdom 1:14]. Proverbs 8 and Job 38-41 are examples of relation between creation and wisdom.
- Wisdom: The laws of order in creation can be discovered through wisdom. Sages instruct people how to live in accord with wisdom and to investigate chaos within that order: namely bad things happening to a good person [see Job]. Wisdom is said to have four aspects: 1] *it is practical knowledge* about the working of the world, how to master it to enjoy life fully. Practical knowledge involves judicial activity of kings and judges [2Sam 14:1-24]; it can be skills of artists [Exodus 35:30-36]. 2] *Human wisdom has limits.* Proverbs 26:4-5 says: "Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself. Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes". Solomon is the model sage who desires and prays for wisdom [Wisdom 7-9]. 3] *Wisdom is both a human task and a divine gift*, acquired through

experience and obedience and given by God. 4] *Wisdom in the Bible is subject of constant reflection.* Job 28:28 declares that wisdom is hidden with God and the only way to wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Wisdom is like ether permeating the cosmos [Wisdom 7:22-8:1]; wisdom is revealed to human beings after prayer and pursuit [Sirach 7:1-22; 8:2-9:18].

- Consequences of human choice: Wisdom is linked to actions of man; man's good and evil choices have effects on individuals and community. For example, in Proverbs 1:18-19 a parent warns the children not to join a band of robbers because such a way of life is self-destructive. God is the all seeing one; he rewards the righteous and he thwarts the plans of the wicked!
- The two ways: the wisdom books present the way of life and the way of destruction. The way of life is linked to the observance of God's law, the blessed way. The way of the wicked is cursed and full of pride. Those who follow the righteous way is called children of light and the wicked, children of darkness.
- Problem of evil: the question of evil is a perennial problem and the wisdom books try to deal with it by asking why does the righteous person suffer? It is treated as part of life's mysteries and there is no definitive answer to this problem. Book of Job narrates the suffering of an innocent man. Sirach seems to assume that God created everything in pairs and that God allows evil along with good and man has the freedom to choose between right and wrong [Sirach 15:11-20; 33:7-15]. The book of Wisdom teaches immortality as solution to the suffering of the innocent.

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