**What You Should Know from OT6-Old Testament Wisdom Literature**

Lakeside Institute of Theology

1. Why should Christians study the Old Testament?
   1. It is the “Scriptures” referred to by Jesus and the Apostles.
   2. The Old Testament is part of God’s Inspired revelation to us.
   3. The Old Testament is foundational to our understanding.
   4. The Old Testament is practical.
   5. The Old Testament points to Jesus Christ.
2. How many sections are in the traditional Christian structure of the Old Testament, and how many books are in each?
   1. The Law, or Pentateuch – 5 Books: Genesis to Deuteronomy.
   2. The History Books – 12 Books: Joshua to Esther.
   3. The Wisdom Books – 5 Books: Job to Song of Songs.
   4. The Prophesy Books – 17 Books: Isaiah thru Malachi.
3. How many sections are in the traditional Jewish structure of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), and how many books are in each?
   1. The Law, or *Torah* – 5 Books: Genesis to Deuteronomy.
   2. The Prophets, or *Nevi’im* – 8 Books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel (1&2), Kings (1&2), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Book of the Twelve (the 12 minor prophets).
   3. The Writings, or *Ketuvim* – 11 Books: Ruth, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah (1 book), Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentation, Daniel, Chronicles (1&2).
4. In terms of content, what is the difference between the 39 books of the English Old Testament, and the 24 Book of the Hebrew Bible?
   1. None – it is the same content, just broken up differently and in a different order.
5. Over what period of time were the books of the Old Testament written?
   1. Between 1400 and 400 BC.
6. What is meant by “Wisdom Literature?”
   1. In the Ancient Near East, “wisdom literature” was a genre characterized by practical answers to existential questions about God, humanity, Creation, evil, suffering, morality and human conduct.
7. What do we mean when we say Old Testament Wisdom Literature reflects “experiential knowledge?”
   1. Every culture devotes itself to gathering and preserving what has been learned about life & how best to live it – to pass on to others, especially their children. Old Testament Wisdom Literature reflects the ancient Israelite effort to capture this experiential knowledge.
8. How might we say the OT Wisdom Literature relates to the Law of Moses?
   1. Wisdom writings are consistent with the Law of Moses, but recognize that the Law may not be directly applicable to all events in life – so wisdom is needed to interpret and apply the truth.
9. How might we say that OT Wisdom Literature relates to both the rest of the Old Testament and from Greek philosophical systems?
   1. The Wisdom writings differ from the Books of the Law and the Prophets in that they draw on practical human experience of living in the world, rather than on “thus saith the Lord” kinds of revelation.
   2. However, God’s presence & revelation are not *dismissed* by the Wisdom writing; rather they are *assumed.* Wisdom writings are fully consistent with Jewish theistic & ethical creeds.
   3. The Hebrew Wisdom Literature deals with general ethical and religious topics – the concrete issues of life – without any effort at a philosophical system. *(“How do you live”* rather than *“What is the meaning of life.”* )
10. In what key way does the OT Wisdom Literature differ from the Historical and

Prophetic Books of the OT?

* 1. The Historical & Prophetic books primarily deal with major events during which God speaks through prophets and priests. The Wisdom Literature reflects the time in-between these great events, helping to guide the people through the daily routines of life and its challenges – how to discipline an unruly child, how to teach children what they need to know to become worthy adults, the dangers of gossip and slander, the need for hard work, the dangers of wealth, why wicked people seem to prosper, the dangers of immoral behavior, why people suffer, etc.

1. According to the OT Wisdom Literature, where does all wisdom begin?
   1. God is the Creator both of people and the physical world, and all wisdom begins with that understanding.
   2. “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.”
2. What is one primary way OT Wisdom Literature differs from some of the

prominent Greek philosophies, including especially the later Gnosticism?

* 1. Wisdom accepts that the created world is good; there is no evidence in God’s creation of the evil material world of Greek thought.

1. What are the books included in the category of “Wisdom Books” in the Christian Old Testament?
   1. Job
   2. Psalms
   3. Proverbs
   4. Ecclesiastes
   5. Song of Songs, *or* Song of Solomon
2. In what way might we say that Wisdom Literature is “old-fashioned?”
   1. Wisdom tradition represents the wisdom of experience; preference is usually given to age and established ways of doing things.
   2. Wisdom tends to be grounded in traditional social structures – the family, king, royal court, “schools” of wise elders.
   3. Wisdom perspectives do not demand or expect radical change, but emphasize instead choosing the right path that will eventually lead to well-being.
3. In what way might we say that OT Wisdom Literature is immediate and

practical?

1. Wisdom literature is little concerned with history, politics, God’s acts, miracles, sin, forgiveness or guilt. Not that these things are discounted, but wisdom is concerned with mundane aspects of life – raising children, providing economic security, finding an appropriate spouse, etc.
2. Wisdom’s focus is not mythical or spiritual, but is concerned with practical stability and order – how to live well with God, others and the world.
3. Wisdom’s truths are not unique to Israel, but are true for all people (though there is an assumption of Israel’s unique relationship with God).
4. How might we say the OT Wisdom Literature reflects the Jewish idea of “perfect knowledge?”
   1. The most perfect knowledge is not the product of rational analysis, but of God’s divine revelation followed by real life application.
   2. That’s why Hebrew Wisdom literature sees the existence of Jewish law and custom, given by God, as the basis for right conduct – not the Greek philosophical arguments that good behavior is demanded for the health of the state and family, or out of fear of reprisal. (Some Wisdom writings – like Ecclesiastes – do say that punishment can follow poor choices, but good behavior is still primarily a response to God’s instructions.)
5. What is the theme and purpose of the Book of Job?
   1. To help us understand suffering, especially undeserved suffering.
6. Who wrote the Book of Job?
   1. Unknown. The book does not name it’s author. Possible candidates are Job himself, Elihu, Moses or Solomon.
7. What is the theme and purpose of the Book of Psalms.
   1. Prayer and Worship; how we relate to God.
8. Who was the author of the largest number (at least 73) of the 150 Psalms?
   1. King David.
9. What is the meaning of the word “Psalm” and from where does it come?
   1. The Hebrew name for the book is *Tehillim*, or “Praises.” The Greek translation, *psalmoi*, means “instrumental music.”
10. Who is believed to be the author of the oldest Psalm, and about when was it written?
    1. Moses, around 1450 BC.
11. What is believed to be the newest Psalm, and about when was it written?
    1. Psalm 137 was apparently written during the Babylonian Captivity, around 586-538 BC.
12. How many discreet “sections” or sub-books are there in the Psalms, and how are they divided?
    1. The Book of Psalms is a divided into Five Sections, with the closing of each marked by a doxology:
13. What are *some* of the different types of Psalms?
    1. Hymns – songs of praise for God and his work in creation.
    2. Communal Laments – in which the nation laments some common disaster.
    3. Royal Psalms – dealing with the king and events in his life.
    4. Individual Laments – lamenting events in the life of an individual.
    5. Individual Thanksgiving Psalms – in which an individual gives thanks for blessings.
    6. Wisdom Psalms – similar to Proverbs.
    7. Psalms of Remembrance – recollecting past events, especially God’s great work on behalf of the Israelites.
    8. Judgment Psalms – visiting curses on enemies.
14. What is “The Hallel,” and what does the word mean?
    1. Psalms 113-118, which are special Psalms of Praise meant to be read publically at Jewish religious feasts and festivals. “Hallel” means “praise” – it’s where we get the word “hallelujah.”
15. What were the “Songs of Ascent” and how were they used?
    1. Psalms 120-134, which were sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem, and by priests as they mounted the steps to enter the Temple.
16. What is meant by “Hebrew Parallelism?”
    1. A poetic form in which two or three parallel phrases are used to give variations on a theme, to emphasize a point.
17. What are some types of Hebrew Parallelism used in the Psalms (and elsewhere in the Old Testament)?
    1. **Synonymous Parallelism** – in which the content of a first phrase is repeated in different words for emphasis.
    2. **Antithetic Parallelism:** in which the content of a second phrase is contrasted sharply with the first phrase.
    3. **Synthetic Parallelism** – in which the content of a second phrase takes the thought of the first phrase further.

1. How does Hebrew poetry differ from our Western poetry?
   1. Western poetry is written for the ear, with audible meter and rhyming.
   2. Hebrew poetry is sometimes called “poetry of the mind” because it relies not on sounds but on verbal images that evoke feelings or create mental images in the reader.
2. What is the theme and purpose of the Book of Proverbs?
   1. Wisdom for living a good life.
3. Which of the Wisdom books are included in the Five Megillot?
   1. Ecclesiastes
   2. Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon)
4. Why do we say Proverbs is a “collection of collections?”
   1. It is made up of seven sections plus an epilogue, written by an assortment of different authors and collected over a long period of time.
   2. Tradition holds that Solomon was author of parts of the book, but Proverbs itself attributes some of the writings to other wide men (Agur, King Lemuel, etc.)
5. When was the Book of Proverbs written?
   1. If Solomon is seen as a primary author of Proverbs, then these sections would date to the 10th century BC, during the time of the United Kingdom. But some sections (such as references to the role of Hezekiah’s men in chapter 25) likely were not added until sometime between 715 and 686 BC.
6. Why would we say Proverbs is an excellent example of ancient wisdom literature?
   1. Because it deals with questions of values, moral behavior, the meaning of human life and right conduct.

1. What is perhaps the major theme of the Book of Proverbs?
   1. “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.”
2. What are some of the literary forms found in Proverbs?
   1. Instructions – extended admonitions, usually addressed to “my son” or “my sons.”
   2. Wisdom Speeches – poems of several verses which personify wisdom and folly.
   3. Proverbs – short aphorisms making a moral or ethical point.
3. What are some of the types of proverbs (short aphorisms) found in the Book of Proverbs?
   1. Sayings – descriptions of how wisdom or folly work, and are indicative rather than imperative.
   2. Admonitions – giving an imperative command, with either positive or negative consequences.
   3. Numerical sayings – probably derived from game or riddles, these usually follow an *X, X+1* pattern.
   4. Rhetorical Questions – forcing the student towards the right answer.
   5. *Calls to attention – demanding focus.*
   6. *Reflection on experiences – shared from a teacher to a student.*
   7. *Account of personal observation – another form of argument from experience.*
   8. *Beatitudes – promises or exclamations of happiness.*
   9. *Allegory/extended metaphor – usually with imagery, especially of water.*
4. What is the Hebrew name for the Book of Ecclesiastes, and what does it mean?
   1. “Koheleth,” which means Teacher or Preacher, who is presented as the author of the book.

1. Why has it traditionally been held that Ecclesiastes was written by Solomon?
   1. The book begins by introducing the author as “son of David, King in Jerusalem.”
   2. The range of activities and experiences described would have only been possible by a person of great power and wealth – much like Solomon.
2. In light of finding all human activity “meaningless,” what counsel does the writer of Ecclesiastes leave us with?
   1. Seek wisdom as a means for a well-lived earthly life.
   2. Enjoy the simple pleasures of life – eating, drinking, taking enjoyment in one’s work – for these are gifts from the hand of God.
3. What is the ultimate theme of the Book of Ecclesiastes, as expressed at the end of the book?
   1. “Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. (12:13)
4. What are other names often used for the Song of Songs?
   1. The Song of Solomon
   2. Canticles (which means “Songs”)
5. What is unique about the Song of Songs compared to other Scriptures?
   1. It makes no reference to Law, Covenant, or the God of Israel.
   2. It also does not explore “wisdom” as do Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.
6. What is the literal subject and theme of the Song of Songs?
   1. A celebration of romantic and sexual love.
7. Why was Song of Songs challenged as to the appropriateness of including it in the Hebrew Canon, and why was it eventually accepted?
   1. Because it is a celebration of romantic and sexual love, without little theological content.
   2. It was accepted because of its supposed authorship by Solomon, and because it was seen not as a story of sexual desire so much as a story of God’s love for his people Israel.
8. Traditionally, how has the Christian Church interpreted the Song of Songs?
   1. As an allegory, with the romantic love being an allegorical reference to Christ (the bridegroom) and his Church (the bride).