WHAT IS “WISDOM LITERATURE”?
Wisdom literature was widespread in the ancient near eastern from Egypt to Mesopotamia, and there are parallels in India and China as well. The basic purpose of wisdom literature was to educate the upper classes in governing skills. This is fundamentally a secular, not a religious focus.

Wisdom literature made its way into the Bible in the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. The book that is most like other wisdom literature is the book of proverbs, and we’ll start with that. Next week we’ll cover the book of Ecclesiastes, and in the third week we’ll take a look at the book of Job. There are also several psalms that touch on wisdom themes, but I think you’ll recognize those once you become familiar with what those wisdom themes are from Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job.

So how did wisdom literature get into the Bible? In a couple of ways. First, we’ll see that religious themes have been added to the broader ancient near eastern traditions in the Bible. The original, secular sayings are still there, but they’ve been interleaved with religious themes. Second, in the case of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, they were both credited to Solomon, who was famous for his wisdom, as we read in 1 Kings 4:

29 God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. 30 Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. 31 He was wiser than anyone else, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Kalkol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. 32 He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. 33 He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. 34 From all nations people came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.

Notice three things about this passage: first Solomon’s wisdom is compared favorably with that of “all the wisdom of the East” – that’s Mesopotamia, if you’re in Israel – and all the wisdom of Egypt. Egypt and Mesopotamia set the standard for “wisdom”. Second, notice the reference to his communication of his wisdom via proverbs. The books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes both consist largely of proverbs, and both are credited to King Solomon in their opening lines. Finally, notice the reference to plant and animal life. Wisdom traditions drew heavily from observation of the natural world. We’ll see examples of that in all three books we cover.
But I don’t think we’ve addressed the most important reason why wisdom literature got into the Bible until we consider the example of the Psalms. The psalms are clearly prayers of people to God, but now we consider them part of the word of God to us. How is it that prayers composed to God became the word of God to us? A similar move occurred with wisdom literature. At least some of the wisdom literature in the Bible didn’t even originate in Israel, yet it too was believed by our spiritual ancestors to have been inspired by God and inspiring to us. But why not: Israel believed its God was the one God for all peoples on earth.

Over the course of the next three weeks, I’d like to set our sights a little high. Each time I’ll begin by giving an overview of the structure and summarizing the highlights of these books, so you’ll have context for the texts we’ll be discussing. But I’d be doing a disservice to them and you if that’s all that happened. The books were written to increase our wisdom, and that’s what we should use them for, today as they were used three thousand years ago in Solomon’s time, and even longer ago in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

INTRODUCTION TO PROVERBS

1. Structure: Proverbs is organized into five sections by titles at the beginning of each section that ascribe the subsequent proverbs to different authors or groups:
   a. 1:1 attributes chapters 1-9 to Solomon; this section compares wisdom and folly as two women, since the word “wisdom” in Hebrew, Hokhmah, is feminine. This section also connects wisdom to faithfulness to God.
   b. 10:1 attributes chapters 10-24 also to Solomon, so the question is, why the new introduction? A collection of sayings in no particular order, not particularly religious, and in many cases contains sayings that were adopted by Israelites but originating outside of Israel. 22:17 introduces another section with no title: this collection, which goes through the end of chapter 24, has very many parallels to an Egyptian piece of wisdom literature called the “wisdom of Amenemope”.
   c. 25:1 attributes chapters 25-29 to Solomon, but says Hezekiah’s officials copied these. Hezekiah was more than two centuries after Solomon. Another section of random saying, though with a preface setting the sayings in the context of advisors to the king.
   d. 30:1 attributes chapter 30 to Agur son of Jakeh; interestingly, the penultimate message of the book of Proverbs is about the limits of human wisdom.
   e. 31:1 attributes chapter 31 to a King Lemuel. The theme returns to that of chapters 1-9, wisdom vs. folly, and concludes with a poem entitled “a good wife, who can find?” which proves that the supermom expectation has been around almost as long as civilization itself.
   f. This somewhat disordered ordering indicates that, like the Psalms, Proverbs is also a collection of earlier collections of sayings that has been reorganized into its current canonical form. The attributions to various individuals in the book of Proverbs are
most likely fiving credit for collecting and organizing traditional sayings, or even possibly being the inspiration for such a collection.

Now I’d like you to get the sheet with the individual proverbs, which we’ll go through and discuss.

1. Setting in the court – government advisors
   a. A word in its season: In government circles people are always jockeying for influence, and the way they achieve it is by giving the right advice at the right time. This is a combination of understanding external situations – knowing the right advice to give – but also understanding interpersonal situations – knowing when to give it so it’s most effective.
   b. The flip side of a word in its season is silence in its season

2. Broader educational setting: many of the proverbs are not court-specific
   a. Partly due to their genesis as oral “folk sayings” which were then reworked into the poetic parallelism we see in Proverbs and other places; partly also to a kind of intellectual playfulness. People didn’t just reflect on their world for their boss. The cultivation of wisdom is a way of life, not just a job.
   b. Riddles: the point here is to observe what all these examples have in common: in all cases, to succeed one element has to conform to the other dynamically: the ship on the sea, the eagle in the air, and the serpent on the rock. These are also three different elements, if you will: water, air, and earth, suggesting that the principle being drawn is a universal one. The fourth item in the list is the point of it all: successful relationships require that each give and conform to the other. Modern analogue: the point in common is what?
   c. Sometimes the conversion to poetic parallelism made ellipses possible. Leaving parts out encourages people to think for themselves to figure out what’s missing.

3. Major themes
   a. How to get rich: this is one of the most common topics in Proverbs, which is a clear indication that it was mainly written by parents for their kids. Just kidding. 10:4, 13:11, 19:4
   b. However, riches are also not everything: 15:17, 16:8, 21:6
   c. Wise vs. fool: also an extremely common wisdom theme: 10:1, 10:14, 14:1, 14:3, etc.
   d. Righteous vs. wicked: 10:3, 10:16, 11:8
   e. Wisdom and righteousness go together: practical training plus moral education. That the righteous and the wicked get their just desserts is a common theme in Proverbs, e.g., 11:21. However, already in Proverbs there is also an appreciation that human wisdom is limited: 20:24.

4. Chapters 1-9: wisdom as goodness
   a. 1:1-6: explains the purpose of the book, to teach wisdom
b. 1:7 introduces the particular emphasis of chapters 1-9: wisdom is reverence of God; also 2:1-8.

c. In Prov. 1-9 two “women” serve as figurative illustrations of the distinction between right and wrong behavior. This is partly because the Hebrew word for wisdom, Hokmah, is feminine.
   i. Good woman: 3:13-18, 4:5b-9;
   ii. in chapter 8:4ff.
   iii. Wisdom speaks for herself. 8:22-24: wisdom is present at creation.
      This relates to the Priestly version of creation, in which the creation is planned out and orderly, made according to wisdom. Later Rabbinic tradition identified the wisdom in this passage with the Torah, which represents the organizing principle for all creation. The image of the creation as at the same time orderly and joyful also appears in the book of Job: 38:4-7.
   v. Chapter 9 summarizes the comparison
      1. 9:1-6: good wisdom
      2. 9:13-18: evil folly
      3. 9:7-12: fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom

5. Chapter 31: this is the “bookend” chapter: here we return to the theme of the good woman that was the central theme in chapters 1-9. Canonically, the idea is that, having read the book of Proverbs, you have achieved wisdom so only the good woman is left.

6. The wisdom tradition is self-critical also: their answer to the question “who shaves the barber” is “we do!” Problems with practical wisdom:
   a. Logic can be just a way to go wrong with confidence: reality is unpredictable and chaotic. In Proverbs wisdom kind of falls in love with itself. It’s full of assertions based on the assumption that things make sense. Adding in the religious factor of a good God, which Proverbs definitely does with the claim that God created the world by wisdom, actually makes this particular problem worse. There is some awareness of the finitude of human wisdom already in Proverbs, for example the first few verses of chapter 30, but Ecclesiastes spends an entire book showing the dangers of this bias toward reasonableness.
   b. One of the most common types of proverbs basically says “Good will happen to good people, and bad will happen to bad people.” This is only sometimes true in this world, as the book of Job famously demonstrates, and again, adding in the religious dimension makes this problem even harder.