

This is the Old Testament wisdom literature.

There are four books of the Old Testament that are called Wisdom books.

Anyone know which books they are?

Job – Proverbs – Ecclesiastes – and Song of Solomon or Song of Songs

We see some of this style in the Psalms and the Epistle of James -

and some in the teachings of Jesus.

But most of it is in these four books.



What do you think of when you think of "wisdom"?

Good judgment – discernment – and the like

When the word "wisdom" is used in the Bible it's a little different

than how we use it in English.

In the Hebrew scriptures it means "things known" or "knowledge."

There is a passage in 1 Kings (4:33) that says that Solomon was the wisest of men.

That statement is immediately followed by evidence to back up the statement.

And that is this: He knew a huge number of proverbs -

and could speak of trees – from the cedar that is in the Lebanon -

to the hyssop that grows out of the wall.

He could speak about animals – birds – reptiles – and fish – and it goes on.

Solomon was the epitome of wisdom.

Wisdom itself is feminine in both Greek and Hebrew.

Sophia in Greek and Chokmah in Hebrew



Wisdom seems to be a lot about knowledge.

We tend to think of knowledge as an ever growing body of information.

Each day scientists discover new things about the universe and about us.

But to the ancient world – knowledge was a fixed – utterly static set of facts.¹

There was this unchanging set of rules that governed reality.
Those rules were thought to be established since the world had been created.
And Proverbs will say that God created the world with "Wisdom." (Sophia)

To have wisdom was to know these rules.
Not only the rules that governed the natural world -
like Solomon's knowledge of trees and animals -
but the rules that governed the way people behaved -
and the consequences of their behaviors.

But – get this. God had created these rules and immutable patterns.

But God did not publicize them.

They lay hidden beneath the surface of things.

The learned people – the sages – had the job of discovering them.

The hope was that with centuries of observation -
much of this underlying set of rules that governed reality – was known.
If you possessed wisdom – you had mastered all that had been discovered.

By the time biblical Israel came along -
the wisdom traditions had been at work for centuries in other cultures -
like China and Egypt.

In fact – it was said that Solomon's wisdom
was greater than that of all the peoples of the east and of Egypt.
Egypt was the gold standard – so to speak – for learning in ancient times.
Egypt was the source of much of the Hebrew wisdom teachings.



So how did we get these Proverbs?

Let's consider if someone makes a scientific discovery today.

How do they let people know?

They would write it up in a scientific journal – and probably get it on the internet.

Social scientists or teachers of the humanities might write longer papers
and their universities might publish them.

But in the ancient Near East – if you discovered something about
how the world works – you had to package your insight in a form in which it could travel.

That form was a simple – two-part sentence – similar to biblical poetry.

A _____ comma – B _____ comma

This was called in translation a "proverb."

This is the skill. Take a complex idea
and put it into six or seven words that the proverb typically comprised.

What comes to mind is the saying, "Keep It Simple Stupid."

That may have been the first proverb.

What it means, the sense of it, might not be readily apparent -
and that may be good.

Part of the process or learning was to turn it over and over in one's mind until you
mastered it.

So when the text says that Solomon could speak 3,000 proverbs -
he would have studied thousands of these A comma B statements.

And – he would have known much of what humanity had been able to discover
at the time of his life.

A little about the Proverbs themselves -
They are different from most of the Bible.
They have a different point of view –
and we want to keep that in mind when we read them.

When we read about ancient Israel – it seems they were always in crisis -
but really there were generations that lived in relative peace.
During those times there was not always that booming voice of the prophet
with a "thus says the Lord" message.

There was a daily routine of life that ordinary people had -
and they had time to consider some of the more mundane questions
about how to get along in life.²

This is where the wisdom traditions were more prominent.
They were concerned with everyday life and how to live well.

What is it not about?

It is not about history or politics.

It is not about a God who acts.

It is not about amazing things – miracles -
and really not that much about sin or forgiveness or guilt.
The focus was on daily living and with stability and order – the status quo -
to live in harmony with God and the world.

Wisdom literature is also not about revealed truth.

It does not address the human condition from the divine perspective.
It addressed the human condition through human needs and concerns -
about what we could and should do.

It grapples with understanding the world
but it does not deal with social problems and does not demand radical change.

Like I said – you won't see statements like "Thus says the Lord."

The authority it uses is experience.

God's authority is there to be discovered – but not to be told.

What else?

There is nothing about God choosing the Israelites like we see in Exodus -
or the giving of the law and the land.

Yet Israelite wisdom is still rooted in reverence and commitment to God.

It is just not about a relationship with God.

Wisdom takes seriously the idea that the created order is good.

There is no evil physical world that would emerge in later Greek thinking.

The way of wisdom is an ethical system in which we are responsible for searching -
and finding the doing the things necessary for our well being in the world.

This is one thing I want you to take with you today.



This week's passage from Proverbs strikes a note
that is in keeping with the wisdom tradition.

Wisdom (Sophia) is personified as a female prophet -
calling the people to heed wisdom – warning them of the calamity that will come to those
who ignore the ways of the wise.

She presents a black and white view of the world –
where religion is a protection from calamity.

She cries out in the city streets like a market vendor selling wares.

"How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?"

(Simple means foolish and self seeking – basically)

There is often there is this comparison between the ways of the wise
and the ways of the foolish or simple.

There is a strong didactic note – a teaching style.
So it may have been a primer of sorts for schools –
where young men of the court were educated.
I guess you could call it a values-based education.

But I wonder if you have noticed anything missing.

There is a problematic part.³

And that is the idea that people can avoid bad events by following God's ways.

We can certainly draw a contrast between the counsel in Proverbs
and the Gospel of Mark.

We have read a lot of Mark although we did not read it today.
But the Gospel certainly does not promise those who follow Jesus
will live at ease and without disaster.

What will Mark tell us?

Mark will tell us that it is only in losing our life that we will we find it.

Not very conventional – is it.

Not something you would find in the wisdom literature.

That is the second thing I want you to take with you today -
the shift that happens when the Gospels reflect the life of Jesus.



This is not to say that the conventional wisdom of Proverbs does not have its place.

Foolish and careless actions do in fact undermine happiness and well-being.

Many of our actions do harm us.

Perhaps Mark's message probes deeper into the human condition.
What may be prudent may not be what makes for the most meaningful life.⁴

Jesus did not live by conventional wisdom alone.
And Mark may be re-defining what a successful life really is.

And we are followers of Jesus -
and as we say in our prayer we are called to follow Christ into the world.
And that may not always be what conventional thinking would say to do.

Feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and visiting the prisoner and caring for those
in need is not all that conventional.

Healing the sick gets real complicated when you try as a nation to reform
the way we give and receive health care –
especially if you just apply conventional wisdom.

Standing up for the oppressed and fighting for social justice is sometimes awfully
cumbersome – when you do it -
even if you are just providing some funds for someone else to do it -
when there is plenty to spend it on at home.

But we know that God – the divine – is in the middle of it.

That's why we do it.

But – its not conventional.



Perhaps wisdom is a step along the way to opening our hearts -
to the one who really changes us.

Her message is worthwhile -
and it calls her listeners out of foolishness and selfishness.

Wisdom – Sophia – has been an important image for Eastern Christians.
Constantine even named a major church after her.
But most western Christians have had little awareness of her.
She is one of the feminine images of God – from deep in history -
and that is nice to see.

Wisdom is part of the progress of the Bible -
and an important of our lives – back then – and now too.
It made its way into the materials of the Old Testament because it had value.
That is why I bring it to you today.

I think it is important because sometimes
when we are making decisions in our lives – or in our churches -
it is good to consider where does conventional wisdom say or lead us.
And where does our relationship with Jesus lead us.
Sometimes it may be the same – and sometimes not.

¹ James Kugel. *How to Read the Bible*

² Dennis Bratcher. *The Character of Wisdom: An Introduction to Old Testament Wisdom Literature*

³ Howard Wallace

⁴ Russell Pregeant