

Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature

Introductory Thoughts

- The roots of wisdom thought lie in creation theology.
- Observations of how the world created by God works most of the time
- Most readily found in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes

Types of Wisdom Literature

- **Proverbs**
 - General—a memorable declaration about life as it is
 - How many times have we and others seen Proverbs 14:17 in action?
 - Other examples
 - Descriptive Proverbs
 - State a simple observation about life without dealing with exceptions or applications
 - Proverbs 11:24 also 15:23; 17:27-28; 18:16
 - Prescriptive Proverbs
 - States its truth with a specific aim to influence human behavior
 - Proverbs 19:17 also 14:31; 15:33; 22:22-23
 - By extending a promise of benefit, the proverb subtly appeals for obedience from the reader
 - Comparison Proverbs
 - Seeks to underscore the superiority of certain character traits or personal conduct over other possible traits and conduct.
 - Proverbs 15:17 also 16:8, 16, 19; 17:1; 21:9 and many others
 - Numerical Proverbs
 - Drive their truths home by using the formula $x/x+1$ in the title.
 - Proverbs 30:18-19
 - Title introduces the subject—“things too amazing to understand”
 - The list that follows provides four examples
 - The greatest emphasis is placed on the last item Proverbs 6:16-19
 - Antithetical Proverbs
 - Most common. Found throughout Proverbs 10-15
 - These show a stark contrast as they commend wise conduct and make foolishness look unappealing.

- You must focus on the contrast. What traits or people does the proverb put side by side and which does the proverb commend and why?
 - Proverbs 15:18; 12:25
- **Some Principles of Interpretation for Proverbs**
 - Exercise care to not read a proverb as an absolute promise from God that guarantees the promised outcome if you follow the proverb.
 - Patterns of conduct, rooted in creation theology, that if followed provide the best opportunity for success. These traits are also backed up clearly in other portions of Scripture.
 - Proverbs do not intend to cover every imaginable circumstance
 - Proverbs 14:23; 13:4 Discussions
 - We must be careful to NOT interpret a proverb by modern Western standards of desires. We are not talking about nice homes, new cars, expensive vacations, etc. Simple desires-house, food, happy family.
 - The reality of our fallen world factors into our interpretation. Our fallen world may prevent the full realization of the proverb. (Poor soil, poor climate, poor politics)
- **Wisdom Instruction (imperative)**
 - Purpose is to persuade the hearer or reader to adopt or abandon certain types of conduct or attitudes.
 - Brief-Proverbs 8:33; series of brief instructions in Proverbs 22:17-24:22 (Each of these contains a prohibition “Do not” supported by a motive clause “for” “because”
 - Proverbs 22:22-23 directly prohibits what 14:31 is implying
 - Longer-Most of the content of Proverbs 1-9
 - My Son, it’s time you knew and followed (Proverbs 1:8; 2:1; 4:1; 7:1, etc.)
 - Sometimes include wisdom speech and personification of wisdom-Proverbs 9
- **Principles for interpreting Wisdom Instruction**
 - Wisdom’s commands or prohibitions (instruction) present demands for obedience not tentative suggestions for consideration. We must respond with seriousness.
 - Listen to wisdom speeches as if you were listening to a woman passionately pleading with passing crowds to follow her advice and counsel. How crucial it is to obey! How dangerous to not!

- Having read the text, we would do well to complete this phrase: “This shouting woman urges me to...” Capture the form and content of the text with your statement.
- **Example Story and Reflection** (somewhat autobiographical genres)
 - Example Story-the writer provides a personal experience or other illustration from which he has gleaned an important truth to pass on. They start with something like “I saw and considered,” or “I passed by...” and are followed by the story. They conclude with a statement about the moral to be drawn from the story.
 - Proverbs 24:30-34
 - Reflection-the writer reports personal musings and conclusions about a truth, often including first-hand observations, example stories, and lengthy thought. May include opening formula like example story above, quotation of proverbs or rhetorical questions or example stories and a concluding moral.
 - Reflection is huge in Ecclesiastes
 - Ecclesiastes 1:14; 3:16; 4:1; 5:13; 6:1, etc drawing morals from his observations (2:24-25; 3:22; 5:18-20)
 - A look at Ecclesiastes
- **Principles of Interpretation for Example Stories and Reflections**
 - Determine how the components of the story or reflection support the concluding moral.
 - The reflection in Eccl 4:7-12 speaks to the value of human companionship. The example story of a rich but lonely single man poses the problem (8). The lengthy discourse (9-12) illustrates the moral—life is better when two people share it than one lives alone.
 - Pay close attention to the concluding morals because they express the writer’s main point. Proverbs 24:30-34 again.
 - Applications of an example story or reflection need to flow from that concluding moral. Eccl 4 and cultivating meaningful friendships, local church community thoughts...etc.
- **Disputation Speeches**
 - Consistently found throughout Job while setting aside for a moment the narrative structure of the book. In Job (unlike prophetic disputations where we heard only the prophet’s side) Job reports the arguments of both Job and his friends.
 - Disputations debating the cause of Job’s suffering

- In the end, God offers his irrefutable speeches. (38-39; 40-41) and Job humbly responds (42:1-6)
 - Sometimes the disputation speeches include other literary forms like complaint and other forms of poetry.
 - Job 16:7, 16-17 -- complaint (remind us of Job's frame of reference)
 - Job 16:18-21 -- petition
 - Job 17:13,15; 30:1-31 -- despair
 - Sometimes the disputation includes a hymn or elements of a hymn—describing things that God does on an ongoing basis
 - Job 9:5, 8-10 also 5:9-16; 11:7-12; 12:13-25; 25:2-6; 26:5-14
 - Sometimes the disputation includes a statement of innocence (from worship practices)
 - Job 31: 5, 8, 17, 19, 21-22 If I have done...then let this happen
- **Principles of Interpretation for Job**
 - Since disputation speeches are throughout the book, we should determine what truth(s) dominate each speaker's persuasion.
 - The text shows that Job is the hero and is the most righteous man alive. In the end, God sides with Job against his opponents (42:7-9) and doubly restores his losses (42:10-17). So we must pay close attention to Job's self-defense and be careful to note that the seemingly good advice of his friends often reflects a position diametrically opposed to God's.
 - When other genres are found supporting the disputation speech, we must analyze why they were included and what they contribute to the overall meaning of the speech. Job 9:4b and then hymn 5, 8-10. In the end, Job draws the following inference: such power threatens to overwhelm any human who attempts to argue with it (14-20).
 - Job's statement (avowal) of innocence (chapter 31) provides an interpretive clue for understanding the book. My personal guilt has not caused my suffering...I am asking God to issue a legal verdict in my favor---plea for vindication!
 - In light of this, we must decide from God's speech and Job's responses (chapters 38:1-42:6) whether Job is truly innocent and what the book teaches about the cause of his (our) suffering and proper responses to that suffering. Some human suffering does lie in the mysterious, hidden plans of God for his people.
 - What about the end as an interpretive clue? God vindicates and rewards Job and criticizes the arrogance of his friends. Redemption/Consummation thoughts