



BIBLETRACK 1

TALK 3 WISDOM LITERATURE (PART 1) DR GRAHAM TOMLIN

Talk Outline

Introduction to wisdom literature

- 2 Chronicles 1:7–12: Solomon asks God for wisdom

'Give me wisdom and knowledge that I might lead this people' (2 Chronicles 1:10).

- God grants Solomon his request
- Main wisdom books of the Bible: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job
- Song of Solomon, Psalms and Daniel also contain some wisdom writing
- Wisdom is personified

'By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place' (Proverbs 3:19).

- World was created in and through wisdom
- Wisdom speaks

'The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be. When there were no watery depths, I was given birth, when there were no springs overflowing with water; before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth, before he made the world or its fields or any of the dust of the earth. I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind' (Proverbs 8:22).

- Earth came in to being through God's wisdom

Group work – fifteen minutes

What clues can you pick up about the author, their purpose and the social setting in which they wrote from either Ecclesiastes 1, Proverbs 1 or Job 1?

What is wisdom literature?

- Wisdom literature in Bible is not unique
- Ancient Near Eastern texts similar to Genesis: Gilgamesh epic and Enuma Elish
- Genesis gives Israelite account of creation of the world
- Wisdom literature was common in Ancient Near Eastern world
- Wisdom writing contains elements of philosophy
- Different types of wisdom literature

Types of wisdom literature

i. Proverbial wisdom literature

- Proverbs is an example of this
- Short statements intended to capture truth about the world

ii. Speculative wisdom literature

- Ruminates on nature of life
- Ecclesiastes is an example of this
- Philosophical and meditative

iii. Narrative wisdom literature

- Tells a story
- Job is an example of this

iv. Lyrical wisdom literature

- Song of Solomon is an example of this
- Lyrical writing is closer to poetry
- Also developed in Babylon and Egypt

'God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. 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. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. 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. 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' (1 Kings 4:29–34).

- Glimpse of wisdom from the other nations
- Ethan, Heman, Kalkol and Darda are wise men from other cultures
- Queen of Sheba visits Solomon
- Wisdom is philosophical currency across Ancient Near East

- Types of literature associated with certain people in Old Testament:
 - Pentateuch associated with Moses
 - Psalms associated with David
 - Wisdom literature associated with Solomon
- Ecclesiastes and Proverbs both associated with Solomon but with elements of ghost-writing
- Wisdom is the ability to make good and godly choices
- More about spiritual perception than intelligence
- Opposite to wise man is the fool
- A fool lives life without reference to God

Egyptian wisdom literature

i. Amenemope

- Advice to minor Egyptian official civil servants:
 - Live at peace with others
 - Fate is immutable
 - Cultivate a good reputation
 - Be honest in dealings with others
- Old instructing the young

ii. Ptah-hotep

- Vizier to Pharaoh in 5th or 6th dynasty
- 2500 BC – long before Old Testament
- Old and successful man in court passing on wisdom to colleagues:
 - No one is born wise
 - Know your place
 - Sets out consequences of actions
 - Become attuned to nature of the world

'If you want to perpetuate friendship in any home to which you have access beware of approaching the woman for one attains to death by touching them.' (Ptah-hotep)

- Maxims of wisdom are not revealed by God but are discovered from experience of the past
- Taught that wisdom is attained by listening to elders and through common sense and experience
- Weariness similar to Ecclesiastes

'The prefect, the feudal lord Ptah-hotep, says: O Ptah with the two crocodiles, my lord, the progress of age changes into senility. Decay falls upon man and decline takes the place of youth. A vexation weighs upon him every day; sight fails, the ear becomes deaf; his strength dissolves without ceasing. The mouth is silent, speech fails him; the mind decays, remembering not the day before. The whole body suffers. That which is good becomes evil; taste completely disappears. Old age makes a man altogether miserable; the nose is stopped up, breathing no more from exhaustion.' (Ptah-hotep)

Babylonian wisdom literature

- Babylonian empire very significant in Israelite history
- Israelites went partly to Assyria and partly to Babylon during the exile
- Babylonian culture had tradition of wisdom

i. The Counsels of Wisdom

- Babylonian gods (Marduk and Samas) establish and maintain order within the world
- Advice to young apprentice officials

'Do not make a slave girl your favourite or install her in your bedroom for this is to sow dragons' teeth in your household.' (The Counsels of Wisdom)

'Do not marry a prostitute. In your troubles she will not support you, in your dispute she will be a mocker. There is no reverence or submissiveness with her.' (The Counsels of Wisdom)

ii. Ahikar

- Written in Aramaic in 4th or 5th century BC
- Ahikar was a chancellor to the Assyrian king Sennacherib
- Addressed to Ahikar's adopted nephew

Wisdom literature in Israel

- Written around the time of the exile and towards end of monarchy
- Grows in popularity during the exile and in post-exilic and inter-testamental period

'They said, "Come, let's make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not cease, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let's attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says" ' (Jeremiah 18:18).

- Three types of literature:
 - Teaching of law by priest
 - Word from prophets
 - Counsel from the wise
- Wisdom writing partly from old Hebrew proverbs
- Connection with Egyptian culture through Joseph began wisdom tradition within Israel
- Association between Israelite kings and other nations

'King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart' (1 Kings 10:23–24).

- Sections of Israelite wisdom literature the same as Babylonian and Egyptian writings
- Proverbs 22:17–23:14 seems to have been lifted from Amenemope
- Taught in 'Schools of Wisdom'

'Have I not written thirty sayings for you, sayings of counsel and knowledge, teaching you to be honest and to speak the truth, so that you bring back truthful reports to those you serve?' (Proverbs 22:20–21).

'Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true' (Ecclesiastes 12:9–10).

- Imparted knowledge but also acted as editor by searching out proverbs
- 'Schools of Wisdom' often connected to royal court

'Jonathan, David's uncle, was a counsellor, a man of insight and a scribe' (1 Chronicles 27:32).

- Wisdom does not just come through experience but through revelation
- Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom

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