



# BIBLETRACK 1

## TALK 3 WISDOM LITERATURE (PART 2) DR GRAHAM TOMLIN

### Talk Outline

- Wisdom writing is principally found in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job but sections can also be found in other books of the Bible such as Psalms and Daniel

*'Hear this, all you peoples; listen, all who live in this world, both low and high, rich and poor alike: My mouth will speak words of wisdom; the meditation of my heart will give you understanding. I will turn my ear to a proverb; with the harp I will expound my riddle' (Psalm 49:1–4).*

### Proverbs

#### i. Date

- Probably the earliest of the three books
- Compiled over time
- Earliest writings from around the time of Solomon
- May have reached final form around the time Israel returned from exile
- Possibly completed around the time of the book of Ezra

#### ii. Author

- May have been an original collection of proverbs written by Solomon
- Not all written by Solomon

*'The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an inspired utterance' (Proverbs 30:1).*

*'The sayings of King Lemuel—an inspired utterance his mother taught him' (Proverbs 31:1).*

#### iii. Content

- Proverbial wisdom style
- Sayings often directed from old to young
- Advice on how to live life well

## iv. Structure

- Chapters 1–9: warnings about folly and advice about seeking wisdom
- Chapter 10: beginning of different section

*'The proverbs of Solomon' (Proverbs 10:1).*

- Proverbs of Solomon from chapter 10–21
- Proverbs 22:17–24:34: Sayings have been lifted from other texts
- Proverbs 25–29: More proverbs from Solomon edited by the men of Hezekiah

*'These are more proverbs of Solomon compiled by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah' (Proverbs 25:1).*

- Proverbs 30: Sayings of Agur
- Proverbs 31: Sayings of Lemuel
- Proverbs 31:10–31: The Wife of Noble Character

## v. Themes

- Living in harmony with divine order
- Learning to live according to the pattern of wisdom
- Proverbs explains how to live to this pattern in small details of life

*'My son, if sinful men entice you, do not give in to them. If they say, "Come along with us; let's lie in wait for innocent blood, let's ambush some harmless soul, let's swallow them alive, like the grave ... my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths' (Proverbs 1:10–12, 15).*

- Avoid violence

*'Wisdom will save you also from the adulterous woman, from the wayward woman with her seductive words, who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God. Surely her house leads down to death and her paths to the spirits of the dead' (Proverbs 2:16–18).*

- Avoid promiscuity

*'How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest— and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man' (Proverbs 6:9–11).*

- Avoid laziness
- Strive for discipline, integrity, prudence and patience
- Advice of royal court

*'Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among his great men; it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman' (Proverbs 25:6–7).*

- Proverbs 7–9: Call of wisdom and folly

*'I have fellowship offerings at home; today I fulfilled my vows. So I came out to meet you; I looked for you and have found you! I have covered my bed with colored linens from Egypt. I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon. Come, let's drink deeply of love till morning; let's enjoy ourselves with love!*

*My husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey. He took his purse filled with money and will not be home till full moon' (Proverbs 7:14–20).*

*'Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? At the highest point along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand; beside the gate leading into the city, at the entrance, she cries aloud: "To you, O people, I call out; I raise my voice to all mankind. You who are simple, gain prudence; you who are foolish, set your hearts on it' (Proverbs 8:1–5).*

- Proverbs is most similar to other Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature
- Difference is dependence on Yahweh

*'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. For through wisdom your days will be many, and years will be added to your life' (Proverbs 9:10–11).*

- Yahweh gives true wisdom

*'For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding' (Proverbs 2:6).*

*'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones' (Proverbs 3:5–8).*

- Proverbs warns of destructive nature of pride
- Critique of other strands of wisdom from Ancient Near East

## **vi. Values**

- Discipline
- Integrity
- Prudence
- Hard work
- Obedience
- Listening to elders
- Generosity

*'Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife' (Proverbs 25:24).*

*'As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed' (Proverbs 26:14).*

*'Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down' (Proverbs 26:20).*

## **vii. Interpretation**

- Proverbs are deliberately pithy, memorable and simplistic
- Not legal guarantees from God
- Cannot be lifted out of context

*'The fear of the Lord adds length to life, but the years of the wicked are cut short'* (Proverbs 10:27).

- Articulation of general principles of life
- Proverbs can contradict each other

*'Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself.'*

*Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes'* (Proverbs 26:4–5).

- Deeper instinct or wisdom to know when a particular proverb applies
- Biblical wisdom is not just about memorising Scripture but about having spiritual instinct to know when particular Scriptures apply
- Proverbs are general truths not specific guarantees

## **Ecclesiastes**

### **i. Date**

- Written later than Proverbs
- Probably around 250–200 BC
- Similar to earlier Egyptian writings

### **ii. The Man Who was Tired of Life**

*'Yet life is a transitory state, and even trees fall. Trample on wrong, for my misery endures. May Thoth who pacifies the gods judge me; may Khons defend me, even he who writes truly; may Re hear my plaint, even he who commands the solar bark; may Isdes defend me in the Holy Chamber, [because] the needy one is weighed down with [the burden] which he has lifted up from me.'* ('The Man Who was Tired of Life')

- Sense of weariness
- Parallels between Ecclesiastes and other Ancient Near Eastern literature

### **iii. Author**

- 'The Teacher'
- Qoheleth means teacher in Hebrew
- Translated into Greek – Ecclesiastes
- Attributed to Solomon

*'The words of the Teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem'* (Ecclesiastes 1:1).

- May be attributed to Solomon but ghost-written

## iv. Content

- Speculative rather than proverbial wisdom
- Voice of one person reflecting on life
- Critique of wisdom suggests a knowledgeable author who has grown weary of wisdom literature

*“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless”* (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

*“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Everything is meaningless!”* (Ecclesiastes 12:8).

- Life is random

*‘What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever ... All things are wearisome, more than one can say. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun’* (Ecclesiastes 1:3–4, 8–9).

- God seems silent

*‘He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end’* (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

*‘As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things’* (Ecclesiastes 11:5).

- Death hangs over everything

*‘All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not’* (Ecclesiastes 9:2).

- All we can do is to delight in the simple life

*‘Then I realised that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labour under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot’* (Ecclesiastes 5:18).

## v. Themes

- Self critique of wisdom literature

*‘I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! ... I thought to myself, “Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge.” Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief’* (Ecclesiastes 1:12–13, 16–18).

*‘Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise— why destroy yourself?’* (Ecclesiastes 7:16).

*‘All this I tested by wisdom and I said, “I am determined to be wise”— but this was beyond me. Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound— who can discover it?’* (Ecclesiastes 7:23–24).

- Ecclesiastes picks up theme of internal critique of wisdom tradition within the Ancient Near East and of misuse of wisdom within Israel

*'How can you say, "We are wise, for we have the law of the Lord," when actually the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely? The wise will be put to shame; they will be dismayed and trapped. Since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what kind of wisdom do they have?' (Jeremiah 8:8–9).*

- Tension between prophets and wise men

*'Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish' (Isaiah 29:14).*

- Ecclesiastes questions simplicity of Proverbs and critiques its misuse
- Few easy answers in life
- Wisdom is criticised but it is preferable to folly
- Important to fear God: Ecclesiastes 3:14, 12:1, 5:2
- Wisdom is good even if it has its limits
- Enjoyment of what God has given

## **vi. Interpretation**

- Book for those with more questions than answers
- Even cynics can be believers
- We can still fear God and thank him even if we don't understand him
- Even those with questions can believe
- Opposite of faith is unbelief not doubt
- Faith and doubt can co-exist
- We shouldn't pretend to understand God
- Questions are natural within the life of faith

## **Job**

### **i. Date**

- Estimated between 700–500 BC

### **ii. Author**

- Author is unknown
- Job is an Edomite
- A Sheik in the land of Uz east of dead sea (now known as Jordan)
- Possibly written by Israelite Sage from Edom
- Versions of same story in Egyptian and Babylonian collections

### iii. Tabu-utel-bel

- Written around 1700 BC
- Babylonian writing

### iv. Content

- Devout man tested in heavenly courts
- Conversation between God and Satan
- God withdraws his hand from Job
- Job loses everything and yet he initially trusts God

*'In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing' (Job 1:22).*

*' "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" ' (Job 1:21).*

- Job is afflicted by boils and his family turns against him
- Job rails at God
- Friends of Job are wise men

*' "Doubtless you are the people, and wisdom will die with you! But I have a mind as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know all these things?" ' (Job 12:2–3).*

- Friends offer counsel:
  - Job has bought on suffering through sin
  - Fate
- God seems evil in Job's eyes

*'Even if I summoned him and he responded, I do not believe he would give me a hearing. He would crush me with a storm and multiply my wounds for no reason. He would not let me regain my breath but would overwhelm me with misery. If it is a matter of strength, he is mighty! And if it is a matter of justice, who will summon him? Even if I were innocent, my mouth would condemn me; if I were blameless, it would pronounce me guilty' (Job 9:16–20).*

- Inner critique of easy answers
- No easy link between sin and suffering
- Many things we cannot understand

### v. Interpretation

- God can take our questions and complaints
- Alongside questioning Job also has a longing for God

*'I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!' (Job 19:25–27).*

*'Then the Lord answered Job out of the storm' (Job 38:1).*

*“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone” ’ (Job 38:4–6).*

- Answer to Job’s questions is not an argument but an epiphany
- Job’s attitude is transformed

*“I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. “You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” ’ (Job 42:2–6).*

- Job’s experience is transformed not by a cold argument but by the reality of God

## Tabu-utel-bel

- Similar story to that of Job

“I advanced in life, I attained to the allotted span: Wherever I turned there was evil, evil-oppression is increased, uprightness I see not. I cried unto god, but he showed not his face. I prayed to my goddess, but she raised not her head. The seer by his oracle did not discern the future; Nor did the enchanter with a libation illuminate my case; I consulted the necromancer, but he opened not my understanding. The conjurer with his charms did not remove my ban.” (Tabu-utel-bel)

- Seer, enchanter, necromancer and conjurer are equivalent to Job’s friends

“He who made woman and created man, Marduk, has ordained that he be encompassed with sickness ...” (Tabu-utel-Bel)

“A conjurer, too, clad in strength, Marduk indeed sent me; Unto Shubshi-meshri-Nergal he brought abundance; in his pure hands he brought abundance.” (Tabu-utel-bel)

- Magician performs spell and all Tabu-utel-bel’s problems are solved
- Job’s problems are not magically resolved but he has an encounter with God
- For Job, an encounter with God is more important than answers to his questions
- Answer in Job goes deeper than in Babylonian wisdom

*“... Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him ...” ’ (Job 13:15 KJV).*

- Some truth can be found in writings from other faiths and cultures
- Within wisdom literature a call to rely not on our own wisdom but on Yahweh
- True wisdom and true theology leads to an encounter with God
- We can live with unanswered questions if we are seeking God
- Without relationship with God then wisdom is neat but ultimately intolerable
- Jesus is called the wisdom of God

*'It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption' (1 Corinthians 1:30).*

- Wisdom is not a set of ideas we learn but a person whom we encounter

## **Acknowledgments**

Scripture quotations taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.

Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, A member of the Hachette Livre UK Group.

All rights reserved.

“NIV” is a registered trademark of International Bible Society.

UK trademark number 1448790.