

Introduction to Wisdom Literature¹

I. The Contents

A. **Job**

1. Although the form of Job is in some ways a narrative, it does not belong integrally to the narrative history of Israel.
2. The historical setting of Job is difficult to determine, but it gives indications of belonging to the era of the patriarchs.
3. It's chief contribution to the canon is its message concerning the suffering of men and the sovereignty of God.
4. Tells the story of a righteous man who is afflicted with tremendous suffering, for no reason that is apparent to him. He is "*comforted*" by friends (not all theologians are pastors!) and *confronted* by God!

B. **Psalms**

1. Although the Psalms share certain features of Wisdom literature, they are often classified separately.
2. The Psalms are a collection of Israel's prayers and songs (mostly from the monarchical period).
3. The form and subject matter of the prayers and songs varies greatly. From individual to corporate; from praise to penitence; from didactic to euphoric; etc. (examples. . .)

C. **Proverbs**

1. This is an anthology of Israel's collected wisdom. Much of it is associated with Solomon (esp. 10:1-22:16), although he is clearly not responsible for all of it.
2. Composed mostly of proverbial couplets, sayings of life-proven truisms.
3. There are also larger through-composed sections extolling the virtues of wisdom and of those who act wisely.

D. **Ecclesiastes**

1. Traditionally ascribed to Solomon, but perhaps written as fictional autobiography from his vantage point.
2. These are the very candid reflections from the perspective of an aged man who has experienced all of life but who has wrestled with the question of what makes life meaningful.

E. **Song of Songs**

1. An enigmatic series of love poems which has been variously interpreted.
2. The actual shape of the story depends considerably on the identification of the characters and the setting. Scholars disagree about this.

¹For resources on this section see Gordon Fee and Doug Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 169-204; and Samuel Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks* (New York: Harper & Row: 1980), 279-97; and Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 174-201.

3. Many have wanted to find a spiritual allegory beneath the surface of the obvious human passion (e.g. Israel and God, Christ and the Church, etc.).
4. Its chief contribution to the canon of scripture may be nothing more than as a clear testimony of God's approval of human love and sexuality.

II. Features of Wisdom Literature, Keys to Interpretation

A. The Perspective of Wisdom Literature: Truth from "Below"

1. Although the biblical Wisdom literature is true in all that it asserts, it is important to recognize that it is very human literature. For example, the prayers and songs of the Psalms are formally human words to God rather than God's words to man. At the very same time they are a Divine Word to human beings.²
2. Because of this formal human dimension in Wisdom literature it is important to note that its wisdom often comes in incomplete pictures, as the reflections of human beings in the middle of anguish (e.g. Job and his friends, Ecclesiastes, the imprecatory Psalms (?)). Often this is resolved within the larger context of the work, so it is important not to extract individual statements as final truth apart from the entire message of a book (or Psalm).
3. Wisdom often comes in the form of generalizing observations about things as they appear, as they normally take place. Such generalizing observations should be taken for what they are at face value but not made into univocal promises or theological axioms. This is especially true of the Proverbs.
4. The honesty of the Wisdom literature's observations, reflections, and wrestlings can be a great source of comfort and affirmation for the Christian similarly afflicted with doubt and questions.

B. The Language of Wisdom Literature: Poetic or Highly Stylized Prose

1. Language of wisdom literature is either poetic or a highly stylized prose. This feature contributes to its
 - a. aesthetic beauty
 - b. suitability for singing or dramatic recitation
 - c. memorability.
2. Often the language is metaphorical rather than literal, evocative rather than precise, sometimes even more doxological (the effusive language of praise) than explicitly theological (the careful language of doctrine).
3. Hebrew poetry contains parallelism within couplets (illustrate with examples).
 - a. Synonymous--the second line says essentially the same thing as the first
 - b. Antithetical--the second line contrasts the first
 - c. Step or Synthetic--the second line adds to or completes the thought of the first line.

²A correct view of Biblical inspiration, which affirms both the fully divine and fully human authorship of the scriptures, not only allows for this kind of paradox it virtually requires it.

Seven Types of Psalms

1. Hymns of Praise—Psalms 8, 29, 45, 48, 66, 68, 100, 104, 111, 114, 117, 144-150
2. Wisdom—Psalms 1, 15, 19, 36, 37, 49, 53, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133, 139
3. Laments—Psalms 3, 5, 10, 12-13, 31, 39, 42-44, 51, 57, 69, 71, 80, 94, 102, 120, 123, 137, 142
4. Songs of Thanksgiving—Psalms 18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 75, 92, 116, 124
5. Salvation History—Psalms 78, 105-106, 135-136
6. Expression of Trust/Confidence—Psalms 11, 16, 23, 27, 62-63, 91, 121, 125, 131
7. Celebration and Affirmation—
 - Covenant renewal—Psalms 50, 81
 - Royal—Psalms 2, 18, 20-21, 45, 72, 95-99, 101, 110, 144
 - Jerusalem—Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122