



UNIT 6 – LESSON 10

THE WISDOM LITERATURE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

“Wisdom” is one of three departments of knowledge among the Hebrews, the other two being the law and prophecy. The law presents the commandments and claims of God to man. Prophecy passes judgement on conduct in the light God’s revealed will and explains the object of God’s dealings with men. Wisdom seeks by observation, experience and reflection to know things in their essence and reality as they stand related to man and God. The law and prophecy proceed directly from God. Wisdom proceeds from man and is the product of his own experience and observation. But while it is a human effort it recognises that a good understanding is a gift of God and it teaches the fear of God and obedience to his commands as its first principle. (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10, Ecc. 12:13).

There are two broad categories of Hebrew wisdom:

1. **Prudential Ethics** - concerned with practical matters of life and conduct
2. **Speculative Wisdom** - dealing with major problems of life such as the nature of wisdom itself and the problem of retribution i.e. why do the good suffer and the bad don’t?

1. **THE WISE MEN:**

In Israel there were distinct classes of wise men along with distinct classes of priests and prophets (Jer. 18:18). Originally wisdom was proclaimed in public places such as the city gate. Later there were actual schools teaching it.

Wisdom literature was in non-Israelite nations too but Israel raised it to higher standards by teaching, for example, higher moral standards and that there was only one true God (monotheism) and not gods (polytheism).

The importance of wise men in Israel possibly dates from Solomon who was renowned as a wise man (1Kings 3:9-14; 4:29-34; 2 Chron. 1:10-12). Solomon’s reputation for wisdom went beyond Israel and his court attracted foreigners who wanted to hear the leading wisdom teachers.

The Book of Proverbs is traditionally associated with Solomon and three sections are attributed to his authorship (Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1). The process of writing and collecting proverbial sayings continued long after Solomon but followed the tradition which he had started.

11. **TYPES OF WISDOM SAYINGS:**

There are at least 4 different types of wisdom writings in the Old Testament, perhaps corresponding to stages of development.

1. The pointed saying, apparently in common use and easily recognised by the hearers. Examples: 1 Sam. 16:7, 1 Kings 20:11; Isaiah 22:13; Jeremiah 31:29; Ezekiel 18:2

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2. The riddle, fable and parable.
Examples of all 3 are found in the Old Testament:
 - (a) Riddle - Judges 14:14
 - (b) Fable - Judges 9:7-15; 11 Kings 14:9
 - (c) Parable - 11 Samuel 12:1-4; Is. 5:1-7; 1 Kings 20:39f.
3. Essays on a theme:-
 - (a) The path of wisdom and the way of wicked (Prov.4:10-19).
 - (b) A warning against adultery (Prov. 6:20-35).
 - (c) A virtuous wife (Prov. 31:10-31).
4. Longer works on a theme.
Job, Ecclesiastes.

111. THE WISDOM BOOKS:

In the Old Testament the Wisdom books are Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Some of the Psalms are wisdom writings and wisdom sayings occur in many of the prophetic books.

In the Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha there are further examples of wisdom writings: Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, 1 Esdras, Baruch, Letter of Aristeas, IV Maccabees, Pirke Aboth.

1V. THE INFLUENCE OF WISDOM LITERATURE

1. In the post-exilic period, when the prophets had disappeared and the priests had turned their attention to ritual, the wise men were the Jewish teachers.
2. The New Testament reveals the influence of wisdom teaching, often drawing on the Apocryphal books:

Proverbs 3:28 cf. Matthew 5:42

Wisdom of Solomon 5:17-20; cf. Ephesians 6:11-17

New Testament references such as 1 Corinthians 1:24, Colossians 2:3, and the Epistle of James also show the influence of Wisdom teaching.

The book of James has been called the Wisdom book of the New Testament.



V. WISDOM LITERATURE AND THE CHRISTIAN

Wisdom literature has more to say about daily living than about doctrine, but it has value for the Christian in both areas.

1. It is related to the person and the Work of Christ

The New Testament Christ is wiser than the Old Testament's wisest man Solomon (Matthew 12:42). Christ personified Wisdom (Proverbs 8:22-36; cf. John 1:1-4) Paul takes up the theme of Wisdom in its relationship to Christ (1 Corinthians 1:22-30; Colossians 2:2-3).

In His teaching Christ used the methods of the Wise Men, such as teaching in parables. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is an example of Wisdom teaching.

2. It is related to contemporary problems

Biblical morality is taught in books like Proverbs and in passages such as the Sermon on the Mount. Ecclesiastes, in its rather negative way, shows that life without God is meaningless. Job takes up the old problem of innocent suffering and does not find an easy solution. Rather, it asks us to trust God even when we cannot understand.

VI. TEACHINGS CONTAINED IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

1. Things said about God

- all powerful - 15:3
- is creator - 3:19
- controls man - 14:31; 20:12;;; 22:2
- is merciful - 28:13
- shows justice - 29:26-27

2. Doctrine of retribution

This is the doctrine that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked in this life. It was a commonly held concept in Israel, associated with the Deuteronomic theory. Proverbs accepts the teaching of retribution (2:21-22, 3:7-16; 4:4), although some of the other wisdom writings (e.g. Job; Ecclesiastes) have differing teachings, reflecting a development of thought.

3. Ethics

- truth and honesty - 2:21; 8:6-9
- respect for life and property - 1:10-15; 14:31; 19:17
- warning against immorality - 5:1-14
- warning against drunkenness and gluttony - 20:1; 23:20f
- warning against idleness - 6:6-10

4. Wisdom

- all wisdom comes from God - 1:7
- God's wisdom is beyond man's reach but he can acquire a portion of it. - 1:20-30.



5. Death

Proverbs and all the wisdom books have the common Old Testament concept that death is the end for man and that at death the shade of man goes to the place of the departed, Sheol. (Proverbs 1:12; 15:11; Ecclesiastes 2:14-16; Job 3:11-19; Job 7:9-10).

In the Apocryphal books Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus, there is hope of life beyond the grave for the righteous.

QUESTION 1

There are several types of wisdom sayings. Give an example of :

- a) a pointed saying
- b) a riddle
- c) a parable (brief summary).

QUESTION 2

Choose any two verses or group of verses listed under Ethics in proverbs and say why they apply today

QUESTION 3

Using the notes and Biblical references, what is your definition of "Wisdom"?

QUESTION 4

How does the view of retribution of the writer of Proverbs (e.g. Prov. 2:20-22) differ from the pessimistic view of the writer of Ecclesiastes in *;11-14.

QUESTION 5

Read 11 Samuel 12:1-12

- a) In this parable who do each of the following represent:-
the rich man; the poor man; the lamb?
- b) What was the central point of Nathan's parable?
- c) Why do you think the Lord told Nathan to confront David with a parable rather than with a direct confrontation?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY

The teachings of the prophets and the wise men did not always agree. However they did share many beliefs. Explain briefly the similar ideas in the following references. There are 3 of them.

- a) Amos 5:21-24 Proverbs 21:3,27
- b) Jeremiah 7:5-10 Proverbs 22:22
- c) Is. 1:19 Proverbs 16:3, 18:10

Are they still relevant today? Why?

**GLOSSARY FOR USE WITH UNIT 6**

Acrostic	-	Poem or other composition in which the first letters of the lines make words.
anarchy	-	Disorder, political or social confusion due to the absence of leadership.
antecedents	-	Going before; forerunners.
Apocrypha	-	Books found in the Greek version of the Old Testament and in the Catholic Old Testament but not accepted as authoritative by Protestants.
apostasy	-	Loss of religious faith, vows and principles.
Apostolic	-	Relating to the Apostles.
austerity	-	Simplicity.
Baal	-	Phoenician and Cananite god; false god.
charismatic	-	Having divinely conferred power or talent.
contemporary	-	belonging to the same time as oneself.
couplet	-	Together, usually of the same length and rhyming.
Deuteronomic Principle	-	The teaching in the book of Deuteronomy (and elsewhere) that those who are obedient to God will be blessed and those disobedient will be cursed.
Diaspora	-	The scattering of the Jews beginning about 300 B.C.
didactic	-	Meant to instruct; having the manner of a teacher.
dispersion	-	Scattering.
dominance	-	Influence; being ruled by.
dynasty	-	Line of hereditary rulers; succession of leaders.
essence	-	All that makes a thing what it is.
ethical	-	Relating to morals, doing what is right.



formulae - Plural of formula; fixed forms of words as a definition or occurring in writings.

GLOSSARY FOR USE WITH UNIT 6 (cont'd)

glossary - A list and explanation of unusual or technical terms.

lament - Passionate expression of grief.

Liturgies - Set forms of public worship. The book of Common Prayer contains liturgies.

messianic - Inspired by the hope or belief in a Messiah or promised deliverer of Jews.

monarchical - To do with having one supreme ruler such as a king, queen, emperor etc.

necromancy - Art of predicting the future by means of communicating with the dead.

omnipresent - Present everywhere at the same time.

oracles - Advice or prophecies (often obscure) given by gods to Ancient Greeks and others.

paraphrase - expressing a passage in other words.

piety - Quality of being devout, religious.

post-exilic - After the exile (of Jews from Jerusalem to Babylon).

precincts - Space enclosed by walls or other boundaries of a place of worship.

Pre-exilic - Before the exile.

prophecy - The revealing and interpreting of God's will.

Pseudepigrapha - Jewish writings supposed to be written by Old Testament Prophets but really written in or just before the early Christian period.

rites - Forms of procedure used in religious observances.

ritual - Set order of performing religious acts.

seceded - Withdrew formally from membership of some body, or federation of States.



sources - Original documents from which a thing is written.

GLOSSARY FOR USE WITH UNIT 6 (cont'd)

stanza - Group of rhymed lines occurring as a repeated metrical unit.

synchronizing - Matching up events that happen at the same time.

syncretism - Attempting to combine differing religions and schools of thought.

theocratic - Being directly ruled by God.

Torah - The revealed will of God, especially the Mosaic law. Also First five books of Old Testament.