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## **CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

### **WISDOM LITERATURE**

### **UNIT 2: BACKGROUND**

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

The term “**Wisdom Literature**” is used of five books of the Old Testament: **Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs**. These books were all part of the *Ketuvim* or “Writings,” which followed the “Law” and the “Prophets” as the third great section of the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Septuagint – the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible – the five books were brought together in a separate group placed between the historical books (Joshua, Judges, etc.) and the prophetic books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.), in the order familiar to us in Christian Bibles. Some later additional books such as the **Book of Wisdom** and **Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)** were also included in the Septuagint, but these were not in the Hebrew Bible. Although they are regarded as canonical by the Catholic, Orthodox, and related churches, they are generally not accepted by most Protestant denominations. This course examines only the five wisdom works found in the Hebrew Bible, but the principles discussed in the course also apply to the later books.

#### **WISDOM LITERATURE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST:**

Wisdom writings were common in a number of the nations of the ancient Near East, and works of wisdom from the Mesopotamian cultures of Sumer and Babylonia are among the most ancient in the world. Some Sumerian wisdom texts date back to the third millennium BC, and Babylonian wisdom writings date to the early second millennium BC. Most of these wisdom works are in the form of dialogues, hymns, and proverbs. The Mesopotamian *Dialogue between a Man and his God*, for example, shares some similarities with the biblical book of Job; the *Hymn to Enlil* is not unlike some of the psalms; and the later Aramaic story *Words of Ahikar* is similar to the book of Proverbs.

Ancient Egypt also produced works of wisdom from the Middle Kingdom (approximately 2050-1650 BC) onwards. The *Debate Between a Man and his Soul* from this period is not unlike the biblical book of Job or some parts of Ecclesiastes. Works such as the *Maxims of Ptahhotep* and the *Instructions of Amenemhat* are similar to the biblical book of Proverbs, and other works such as *A Prayer to Re-Harakhti* (c. 1230 BC) include confessions of sin and appeals for divine mercy reminiscent of a number of biblical psalms.

Although there are points of contact between these ancient Near Eastern works of wisdom and the biblical wisdom writings (and several similarities will be mentioned in this course), it is important to realize that the biblical wisdom books are not simply adaptations of the works of other cultures. Rather, the biblical and extra-biblical works were all produced as part of a popular genre of literature – just as mystery novels are produced in many different cultures today.

Ancient wisdom literature deals not only with deep philosophical issues such as meaning in life and the problem of evil, but also with the smaller and more practical everyday issues of life. In this sense, some ancient works of wisdom resemble detailed modern philosophical writings, while others resemble collections of simple sayings such as “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” or “A leopard does not change its spots” – the kind of practical advice that we call “folk wisdom.” Thus, the biblical wisdom writings include a number of literary types ranging from the philosophical book of Ecclesiastes to the more practical book of Proverbs.

## **HEBREW WISDOM LITERATURE:**

We read in 1 Kings 4:30 that King Solomon’s wisdom was greater than that of “all the people of the East,” and this indicates that the people of Israel must have been aware of the wisdom literature of the nations around them. We are also told that in addition to composing many wise proverbs, Solomon also collected and organized many others (Ecclesiastes 12:9), indicating a level of interaction between the wisdom literature of Israel and other ancient cultures.

But the Wisdom Literature of Israel was unique in certain ways. Not only did the Hebrew wisdom writers acknowledge only a single God, but they also differentiated between purely human wisdom and a higher, divine wisdom that God gives (for example, Proverbs 9:10). Thus, the Old Testament uses the Hebrew word *hokhma* to speak of wisdom that is human (Ecclesiastes 8:1) or divine (Ecclesiastes 2:26) in origin. It is not so much that there are different kinds of wisdom, as that wisdom is partly attained through human effort and partly as a gift from God.

For the Hebrews, knowledge and understanding were both part of wisdom and are often found linked together (Proverbs 1:7; 2:6; 8:12; etc.), but wisdom could mean three distinct things: a way of thinking, the knowledge gained through such thinking, and the ability to apply that knowledge in life. Keeping this distinction in mind can be vital in more deeply understanding what is meant by “wisdom” in a given biblical verse. Consider a few examples of each meaning of wisdom:

### *A way of thinking:*

“The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways” (Proverbs 14:8).

“Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom” (Ecclesiastes 2:12).

“I turned my mind to understand, to investigate and to search out wisdom” (Ecclesiastes 7:25).

### *Knowledge gained by thought:*

“the meditation of my heart will give you understanding” (Psalm 49:3).

“The mocker seeks wisdom and finds none, but knowledge comes easily to the discerning” (Proverbs 14:6).

“The discerning heart [mind] seeks knowledge” (Proverbs 15:14).

### *Applying knowledge in life:*

“Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart” (Psalm 119:34).

“turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding” (Proverbs 2:2).

“Apply your heart to instruction and your ears to words of knowledge” (Proverbs 23:12).

There are other significant aspects of the Hebrew concept of wisdom that we need to keep in mind in understanding the biblical writings, and we will look at these in the units on the individual books of wisdom.

## THE AUTHORS OF HEBREW WISDOM:

The figure of the Israelite king, Solomon, is central to biblical Wisdom Literature. We are told that “God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure” and that it “surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt” (1 Kings 4:29-30). This means that Solomon’s wisdom was greater than that of Mesopotamia (to the East of Israel) and Egypt – the two great cultures of the ancient world. It is for this reason that the Bible stresses his fame spread through surrounding nations and individuals came to learn from Solomon from distant areas (including the famed Queen of Sheba – 1 Kings 4:34; 10:1). The king’s wisdom is celebrated in detail in 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, and 2 Chronicles, and three of the biblical books of wisdom – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon, in addition to some of the Psalms – are thought to have been composed by him.

But parts of the Bible’s Wisdom Literature were composed by other kings (for example, the psalm of Hezekiah found in Isaiah 38:9-20) and by learned and wise individuals who were often separate from the nation’s priests and prophets – individuals who served as the nation’s royal counselors, leaders, bureaucrats, diplomats and other figures of political or religious authority. These individuals composed or collected many of the proverbs and psalms. For example, Psalm 49 which is ascribed to a group of individuals called “the Sons of Korah” incorporates the principles of wisdom into the biblical genre of song:

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 49:3-4)

The remainder of this psalm clearly has similarities to parts of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and even Job, showing the interconnection of the different forms of wisdom writings and the common concerns of the various individuals who composed them.

## THE “MECHANICS” OF WISDOM LITERATURE:

Just as we cannot understand how a physical engine works without some knowledge of the mechanical principles it utilizes, so we need to know something about the “mechanics” of how Wisdom Literature operates in order to fully understand this type of writing.

The biblical wisdom writings make use of many literary devices such as parables, riddles, proverbs, and dialogues, but their most distinctive aspects are their use of personification and poetic parallelism.

**Personification:** Although it is the lesser of these two distinctive aspects, personification plays a very important role in Wisdom Literature. The most famous example is that of wisdom, which appears in the book of Proverbs in the figure of a woman (Proverbs 1:20-33; etc.). This is the most extensive personification found in Scripture and is a particularly striking one similar in many ways to the Egyptian personification of truth as the goddess Maat; but the biblical “Lady Wisdom” is not just the personification of an abstract principle, rather she represents an aspect of God himself. Conversely, human foolishness is personified in Proverbs as “Madam Folly” (Proverbs 9:13-18; etc.).

Although wisdom and folly are its most famous instances, personification is found in many other parts of the wisdom writings. We find it, for example, in statements such as: “Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other (Psalm 85:10). We should remember that whenever personification is used, the wisdom writings are placing particular emphasis on what is said. In this sense, personification is the “bold type” of the wisdom writings.

**Parallelism:** A great deal of biblical Wisdom Literature is composed in poetic form. In fact, these books are sometimes called the “Poetic Books” because so many employ poetic forms completely or to a large degree. But this poetic form is not of itself the identifying factor of wisdom writings – much of the biblical prophetic books are also in poetry – instead, it is the particular aspect of poetic parallelism that is so characteristic of biblical wisdom.

While Hebrew poetry did not utilize meter and rhyme as English poetry often does, its prime feature is the parallelism of thoughts and words in which an idea is expressed and then repeated in another way or contrasted with another idea. This type of writing was particularly well suited to the teaching of wisdom as it allows concepts not only to be repeated for emphasis, but also to be explored, expanded, and expounded more thoroughly. The parallelism usually involves two or more distinct parts, the first expressing the idea in general terms, and the second using more specific or explanatory terms to clarify or expand the idea, or to strengthen the concept, thought, or action involved. This means that although the poetic nature of poems in most languages is lost when they are translated, the parallelism of Hebrew poetry remains, and its meaning is not lost in translation.

We will examine the parallelism that is involved in several of the books covered in this course, but we will summarize here the three basic types of parallelism that we need to be aware of in studying biblical wisdom writings:

**Synonymous Parallelism:** This is the most common type of poetic parallelism in which a second clause restates what is said in the first clause in a different way, in order to expand it or clarify it. For example: “In the way of righteousness there is life; along that path is immortality” (Proverbs 12:28).

**Antithetic Parallelism:** In this type of parallelism, a truth which is stated in the first clause is reinforced in the second clause by contrasting it with its opposite. The two halves are often combined by means of the word “but” as in: “Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs” (Proverbs 10:12).

**Synthetic Parallelism:** In this final type of parallelism, the second clause develops the first by expanding it in some way. The two halves may be connected by words such as “for,” “like,” or “so.” For example: “A king's wrath strikes terror like the roar of a lion; those who anger him forfeit their lives” (Proverbs 20:2).

A great deal of what we read in most of the biblical wisdom books utilizes one or the other of these principles where information is given in two halves that either mirror, contrast, or develop each other. But the parallelism may also be simple or complex. In **simple parallelism** – as in the examples from Proverbs given above – an idea is simply restated or developed in a single step. In **complex parallelism**, the writer continues to add to the original concept with additional steps. For example, in Psalm 1 we read:

Blessed is the one  
who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
or sit in the company of mockers,  
but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and who meditates on his law day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2)

This example shows the stair-like extended parallelism often found in the Psalms and in some other wisdom books. Each successive line builds on the basic concept – in this case, three lines describe what the individual who is blessed will not do, and two then give positive examples of what he or she will do.

## THE MESSAGE OF THE WISDOM LITERATURE:

It is interesting that the great themes that are often said to be found throughout the Bible – themes such as God’s covenant, laws, and grace – are rarely seen in the Wisdom Literature. There are no examples of “Thus says the LORD” or “You shall” or “You shall not.” Instead, the wisdom writings have their own voice and ways of teaching. Yet their underlying truth is the same as that found elsewhere in the Scriptures. We are repeatedly told “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; etc.), and the goal of that wisdom is righteousness (Proverbs 1:3; etc.) – as is seen throughout the Bible.

But the unique perspective of the wisdom writings means that their approach is undeniably different in many areas. For example, wisdom does not call for broad societal change in dealing with social problems, rather it emphasizes the instruction of the individual as the ultimate basis of change and improvement. The message of the Wisdom Literature is nevertheless a universal one. While the biblical books of the law stressed Israel’s special nature as God’s people, and the prophetic books continually stressed the need for purity and separation from outside moral influences, by its very nature wisdom welcomed outside concepts and ideas and wove them into its own teachings.

Wisdom Literature also looks at life and particular subjects from its own perspective. Sometimes its views may seem to be opposed, as when we compare the positive outlook of the book of Proverbs – that the righteous are blessed and happy – with the considered conclusion of Job that living a good life does not always protect us from bad things if God allows them for our good. Yet despite these apparent differences, the underlying message of both books is essentially the same. It is as if Job and Proverbs simply show the opposite sides of the same truth – as when the book of Job tells us, “The fear of the LORD, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding” (Job 28:28 ESV) and Proverbs summarizes the same thought, but more succinctly, as “The fear of the LORD is to hate evil” (Proverbs 8:13 ESV). Job and Proverbs essentially show the same message from opposite ends of the spectrum of wisdom.

This does not mean, however, that the wisdom books have nothing to teach us regarding moral and ethical behavior and right living before God. It has been said, in fact, that Job teaches us how to suffer well, the Psalms how to pray well, Proverbs how to act well, Ecclesiastes how to enjoy well, and the Song of Songs how to love well. The Wisdom Literature is, in short, all about the good life – in both the moral and the practical sense. The good life consists of finding happiness and living righteously – and the Wisdom Literature helps us to do both.



## SIX KEYS FOR UNDERSTANDING WISDOM LITERATURE:

1. Know the “mechanics” of Wisdom Literature. Be sure to understand the essential aspects of how wisdom writings were composed, as outlined above. Without a basic knowledge of the figures of speech and types of parallelism used in these writings, we cannot fully grasp their meaning or get as much from them as we otherwise could.
2. Remember that for the ancient Hebrews, wisdom was more than just knowledge or “smarts.” As we have seen, the biblical writers viewed wisdom as a way of thinking, the knowledge gained by thought, and the application of that knowledge in life. Whenever we read a section of Wisdom Literature, we need to think in terms of which of these meanings the writer had in mind.
3. Remember that for the most part Wisdom Literature teaches the application of theological principles, not theology. For example, many of the proverbs are designed to be memorable rather than doctrinal, many of the psalms are written to convey feeling rather than fact, so we should let the narrative and non-poetic sections of Scripture determine our understanding of biblical doctrines, while the wisdom writings help us to see how to apply and live them.
4. The Wisdom writings must be read as a whole to understand each part. We should not base important conclusions regarding biblical attitudes or principles of living on one wisdom writing at the expense of the others. The basic principle of letting the Bible interpret any given scripture is nowhere more true than in the Wisdom Literature. Much of what is said in Job should be balanced by what Proverbs tells us – and vice versa. But Ecclesiastes helps us see Proverbs in proper balance.
5. All Wisdom Literature is meant to be reflected upon. While meditation on any part of the word of God is profitable and advisable if we are to get the most from it, this is especially true of the Wisdom Literature. Precisely because much that is said in the wisdom writings has to do with either general circumstances (for example, Proverbs) or very specific ones (for example, Psalms), we often need to think about how these things apply in narrower or wider circumstances to see the fullness of what they teach.
6. Remember that the purpose of Wisdom Literature is more than just to make us “wise.” The biblical wisdom writings aim to help us differentiate truth from error and right from wrong in life, and they do help to make us wiser than we might naturally be. But they are not intended to make us feel that we can become perfect through our own right decisions and behavior. Ironically, much of the Bible’s Wisdom Literature helps us to see our own natural foolishness, our own lack of understanding, and our own need for meaning, purpose, and direction in life. In other words, the wisdom writings, like all the Bible’s books, are not just spiritual self-help books. Viewed properly, they help us to see our need of God’s wisdom and help us to receive it.

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### REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

**Terms:** Make a list of the key terms in this lesson (they are bolded in the text for your convenience), along with a short single-sentence definition of each term.

**Applications:** Make a brief summary of the principles you have learned from this unit that you had not thought about before and that may help you in your future study of the Bible’s Wisdom Literature.