

WISDOM BOOKS

An Introduction

There are five books in the Old Testament called “Wisdom books”: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom. In Catholic Bibles, the Song of Songs and Psalms are also grouped in the Wisdom books section.

The reader who moves from the historical or prophetic books of the Bible into the Wisdom books will find him/herself in a different world. While the Wisdom books differ among themselves in both style and subject matter, they have in common the following characteristics:

1. They show minimum interest in the great themes found in the historical and prophetic books, a Law Sinai covenant, election, salvation, idolatry, and Temple worship.
2. They show little concern for Israel as a nation or for its history.
3. Wisdom books are noted for their questioning attitude about the problems in life: Why is there suffering, inequality and death; why do the wicked seem to prosper; and why the seeming arbitrariness of divine blessing on people?
4. All wisdom comes from God. The beginning and end of all wisdom is “fear of the Lord,” that is, filial respect for the One who created all things and holds all things in being. In the Wisdom literature of Israel, we find the authors searching for how to live their lives in harmony with God.
5. A key element of Wisdom literature is divine retribution: God will reward the good and punish the wicked. Yet, this traditional belief is questioned in the book of Job: why does the good and just man suffer?
6. There is great interest in universal human experiences that affect *all* people and not just those who believe in the God of Israel.
7. There is joy in the contemplation of the wonders of creation and God as Creator.

Ministry of the sage or Wisdom teacher. The ministry of the sage or the Wisdom teacher is to reprove, correct, and interact. Their subject matter covers the whole realm of human behavior. Fr. Peter Ellis writes:

*They studied man as man in the light of reason, revelation, and experience; and to this degree they can be called **philosophers**. They had great respect*

*for the acquisition of knowledge about God and man; and to this degree they can be called **intellectuals**. They were concerned with the whole sphere of man’s life and behavior, the human as well as the divine in man’s life; and to this degree they can be called **humanists**. They have been called **individualists** because they apparently thought things out for themselves, gave their own opinions on a multitude of matters and rarely appealed either to the authority of divine revelation or to the authority of other learned sages.*

Nevertheless, they never gave to reason the preeminence given to it by philosophers, nor to mere knowledge the adulation given to it by the intellectuals. The human side of man’s life was important to them, but it never overshadowed the importance of the divine. And though they taught as if theirs was the last word on matters of human behavior, they would have been the first to insist that God’s word was both first and last; indeed, that “the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.”

Like St. Paul they taught their students “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Their purpose, therefore, was not knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but knowledge for the sake of godliness. They taught their students the art of excellence in all things and not just in the things of God, so that there might be said of them what was later said of one “greater than Solomon”: “He has done all things well” (Mark 7:37). They became “all things to all men” (1 Cor. 9:22) after the manner of St. Paul, because they were convinced that all things came from God and were destined through man to be returned to God. Religion concerned all of man’s life and involved a total commitment. It was their purpose to see to it that their students made this commitment and extended it to every area of their lives (cf. Prov. 1:2-7). (The Men and Message of the Old Testament (pp 493-494)

Sirach says of the wisdom teacher: *“He explores the wisdom of the men of old....he studies obscure parables....he is in attendance on the great...he travels among the peoples of foreign lands...if it pleases the Lord Almighty...he will pour forth his words of wisdom... While he lives, he is one out of a thousand, and when he dies his renown will not cease” (Sir. 39:1-11).*

Peter Ellis writes: “*The wisdom writers taught by using mashals, i.e., pointed comparisons loaded with practical wisdom. These comparisons or mashals can be in the form of parables, allegories, riddles, but usually they are in the form of proverbs, i.e., maxims expressed in poetic diction, rhythm, and parallelism, and concerned with moral instruction*”(ibid, p.494).

The teaching of the sages is different from that of the priests and prophets in that it is more universal in scope and less nationalistic. It is for all people and not just the Jews. Because of their great respect for human reason and experience, sages have been called the humanists of the Bible (Wis. 7:17-22).

The sages teach that religion impacts every detail of one’s life. It should inform *all* that one does. According to Wisdom teachers, their sources of wisdom are revelation, tradition, divine inspiration, experience and reason. The means of acquiring wisdom are through study, instruction, discipline, reflection, meditation and counsel. He who hates wisdom is called a fool, sinner, ignorant, proud, wicked, and senseless. The message of the Wisdom teachers can be summed up in the words of St. Paul: “*What things are true, whatever honorable, whatever just, whatever holy, whatever lovable, whatever of good repute, if there be any virtue, if anything worthy of praise, think upon these things. And what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, these things practice (Phil.4:8-9); whether you eat or drink, or do anything else, do all for the glory of God*” (1Cor. 10:31).

Seven wisdom books at a glance

The Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition offers the following short description for each of the seven books contained in the Wisdom section of Catholic Bibles.

1. **Job:** Dramatic poem that treats the problem of suffering of the innocent and of retribution.
2. **Psalms:** Collection of religious songs under the major headings of hymns, laments, and songs of thanksgiving.
3. **Proverbs:** Anthology of mostly short sayings in poetical form whose purpose is to teach wisdom for successful living.

4. **Ecclesiastes:** Treatise on the vanity, or emptiness, of all things. The book is concerned with the purpose and value of human life.
5. **Song of Songs:** Collection of poems filled with sensuous imagery. It could be seen as a portrayal of ideal human love.
6. **Wisdom:** Oratory from the Jewish community of Alexandria about 100 years before the coming of Christ, explaining traditions and themes familiar to Judaism but reinterpreting them from the experience of living in a Greek or Hellenistic culture.
7. **Sirach:** Collection of proverbs dealing with moral instruction, written to show that real wisdom was to be found in the traditions of Israel and not in the godless philosophy of the day.

Wisdom and Sirach are two of the seven books not included in the Protestant Canon of the Bible.