



Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time B September 9, 2018

The Old Testament: Part Ten Wisdom Books of the Bible Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs Book of Job

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 the following characteristics in common:

1. They show minimum interest in the great themes found in the historical and prophetic books, e.g., the 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 asking questions about life’s problems: why there is suffering, inequality and death; why the wicked seem to prosper; why there is a 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.

The sages teach that religion impacts every detail of one’s life. It should inform *all* that one does. Wisdom teachers—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).

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.

ECCLESIASTES

Qoheleth, the author's literary name, was a Wisdom teacher who lived in Jerusalem around 300 B.C. He may have been quite well off, and now, as an old man, is looking back over the meaning of life or the lack of meaning in life; hence, his most famous phrase: "*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!*"

Commenting on this book, Scripture scholar Sr. Diane Bergant writes:

Qoheleth described himself as a man who had the opportunity and the means to pursue all of the pleasures that life had to offer, and he was successful in his pursuits (Eccl 1:12-2:17). Still he was dissatisfied. Where then was one to find satisfaction? The answer to this question is found in those passages that some have misinterpreted as hedonistic; satisfaction is to be found in the very act of living itself. Qoheleth's message reveals a profound appreciation of the fact that life is primarily for living. Every human endeavor, regardless of its own intrinsic value, holds a secondary place to this. All toil, all progress, all organization have merit to the extent that they promote and enhance living. This is a religious message for Qoheleth, who maintains that the creator has implanted the capacity for happiness in each and every human heart, has made living and exciting venture, and wills that every person be afforded the opportunity to find pleasure in living (Israel's Story—Part Two, p.83).

CHAPTER 2: The pursuit of pleasure, wealth, wisdom and other things

"I said to myself, 'Come, now, let me try you with pleasure and the enjoyment of good things.' But behold, this too was vanity." (v.1)

"Nothing that my eyes desired did I deny them, nor did I deprive myself of any joy, but my heart rejoiced in the fruit of all my toil." (v.10)

"I went on to the consideration of wisdom, madness and folly. I saw that wisdom has the advantage over folly as much as light has the advantage over darkness." (vv 12-13).

"There is nothing for man than to eat, drink and provide himself with good things by his labors. Even this, I

realized is from the hand of God. For who can eat or drink apart from him?" (vv 24-25).

Verses 1-12: Study of pleasure-seeking. Qoheleth feels that maybe the meaning of life is to be found in wine, women and song, in the pursuit of all the good things that life has to offer. Soon he finds out that pleasure by its nature is transitory. Even though he seems to have no regrets for his pursuit of pleasure, he also discovers that it does not give meaning to life. It is "*all vanity, a chase after the wind*" (v.11).

As for material riches, these in the end will be left to others. We are reminded of the rich young man who built big barns to accumulate and store more wealth, but did not live to enjoy it.

CHAPTER 9: Happy and gloomy words

"Go, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart, because it is now that God favors your works.

"At all times let your garments be white, and spare not the perfume for your head.

"Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of the fleeting life that is granted you under the sun. This is your lot in life for the toil of your labors under the sun.

"Anything you can turn your hand to, do with what power you have; for there will be no work, nor reason, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the nether world where you are going." (vv 7-10)

"Though I said wisdom is better than force, yet the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words go unheeded." (v.16)

Some have wrongly called Qoheleth a hedonist because he so frequently encourages us to eat, drink and be merry, as he does once again in this chapter. But he has never told us to get drunk or be promiscuous. Qoheleth is essentially a man of faith. All good comes from God and even though many things in life vex Qoheleth, he says all we can do is enjoy our life, celebrate, dress up, wear perfume, and enjoy our spouse.

When reading Ecclesiastes, we must keep in mind that the author has no sense of an after-life. Hence, for him death casts a dark shadow over everything. The book therefore cries out for the revelation of the future life given to Jews only two centuries before Christ.

For more on this Book of the Bible, see my Commentaries, Level 3, Article 72.

SONG OF SONGS

Introduction. This book is known by different titles. It is called the “Song of Songs,” the “Canticle of Canticles” (two English renderings of the same Hebrew expression), and the “Song of Solomon” (the unlikely author but the name most associated with Israel’s Wisdom literature). *Song of Songs* is a way of saying “the best song.”

In her introduction to this book, Renita Weems writes: “To open the pages of this brief book of poetry is to leave the world of tribal conflict, political disputes, royal intrigue, religious reforms, and divine judgments and to enter the world of domestic relations and private sentiments. Filled with the language of sensuality, longing, intimacy, playfulness, and human affection, *Song of Songs* introduces the reader to the non-public world of ancient Israel” (The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. V, p.363).

Two unique features of this book are its unabashed exaltation of physical beauty and human sexuality and the absence of mention of God or any religious themes from Israel’s salvation history.

People ask how a book of love poems with several erotic images and that never mentions God could have gotten into the Canon of Scripture. It only got into the Jewish canon when the leading Rabbis were persuaded that the book, on a deeper level, was about God’s love for the chosen people. The Christians accepted the book without dispute because they interpreted it not only as a story about God’s love for the chosen people, but also about Christ’s love for his Church. Perhaps on a more basic level, we might say that the young lovers chasing after each other is a metaphor of God pursuing us and seeking to seduce us into a loving relationship with him.

On the literal level, the book’s original context celebrates human love and sexuality. No other biblical text so beautifully and poetically expresses this reality.

On the allegorical (or extended metaphor) level, interpreters see a deeper meaning: God’s love for Israel and Christ’s love for the Church. “The Song was a favorite book of St. Bernard who wrote eighty-six sermons explaining it. It was a commentary on the Canticle that engaged St. Thomas Aquinas in the last days of his life. St. John of the Cross used the theme and format of the Canticle to express his highest mystical teachings. And St. Alphonsus returned again and again to the text of the Canticle in the loftiest sections of his great ascetical works” (Men and Message of the Old Testament, p.410).

Renita Weems adds: “This book which tells of love, courtship, compassion, intimacy, longing, and mutual delight resounds with many of the elements that characterize God’s dealings with his people.... Seeing our relationship with God through the eyes of frustrated but desperate lovers, however baffling their behavior, forces us to ponder the powerful emotions underlying the divine-human bond: what it means to be demanding, yet fickle, desperate, but timid; what it means to wound those we love and to be wounded by love; what it means to disappoint those we love and to be disappointed by love; and what it means to be hopelessly attached to each other and trying to hear what the other is saying” (ibid, p.391).

For more on Song of Songs, see my Commentaries, Level 3, Article 75.

The Book of Job

Introduction. The Book of Job is considered a literary masterpiece in wisdom literature. It has been called the greatest work of poetry in ancient and modern times. The author has been ranked with Homer, Dante and Shakespeare. But the book is not an easy or swift read. The author’s words have to be pondered as he deals with the great mystery of God’s love and human suffering. While the writing is seen as one person’s attempt to deal with the perennial question of why an all-good and all-loving God allows a good and faithful person to suffer, other issues are also raised in the book.

Drama of five scenes

Job opens with a narrative introduction or prologue, followed by a series of poetic dialogues and a narrative epilogue. The book is subdivided into five sections or scenes.

Scene 1 (Chapters 1-2). The prose dialogue has five scenes alternating between heaven and earth. In the heavenly scenes, God and Satan are engaged in a dialogue about Job. Satan says that Job is only loyal to God because God has been so good to him. God allows Satan to test Job to see if Job will remain loyal to God even when bad things happen to him. Despite the terrible suffering inflicted on Job by Satan, Job refuses to follow his wife’s advice to “curse God and die” (2:9). Then three of Job’s “friends” come to comfort him.

Scene 2 (Chapters 3-31). This long section comprises three series of conversations between Job and his three “friends” concerning divine justice as it relates to Job’s suffering. Job’s friends, holding tightly to the traditional belief of retribution on earth, conclude that Job is suffering because he has sinned. Job challenges this

presupposition and insists that he is innocent. He seeks to comprehend why a just God would allow him, a good man, to suffer so much. Job repeatedly bangs his head against the mystery of divine justice. His tortured soul matches his suffering body. At the end of the series of conversations, Job demands that God appear and defend himself if he is a just God.

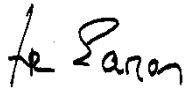
Scene 3 (Chapters 32-37). Suddenly, an upstart called Elihu enters the story. He challenges both Job and his friends, and demands that they submit to the God who controls all events.

Scene 4 (Chapters 38-41). God breaks his silence and begins to speak. He tells Job that he is in no position to understand the workings of God. Finally, Job gets it and submits twice. He says: *“Behold, I am of little account; what can I answer you? I will put my hand over my mouth”* (40:4). Then later in 42:6, he says: *“I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes.”*

Scene 5 (Chapter 42:7-16). The final scene gives us a happy ending. Job’s friends are told that they have misspoken. God restores to Job all his material blessings and gives him twice as much as he had previously owned.

For more on The Book of Job, see my Commentaries, Level 3, Articles 70 & 71.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. E. Saran". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.