

The Old Testament: Part Thirteen

Wisdom Books of the Bible

The following are some excerpts from a fuller introduction to the Wisdom books of the bible. (For the complete introduction, see Article 66 on my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*.)

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 proclivity for questioning about the problems in life: why there is suffering, inequality and death; why the wicked seem to prosper; and 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. 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).

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).

Commentary. For those of you who have been reading my columns on the Old Testament but *not* reading my commentaries on the various books of the Bible, I suggest you consider reading the text itself and my commentary on it (Article 72 in my *Commentaries of the Books of the Old Testament* on our website). Qoheleth has often been called a modern-day existentialist. The best known text in this book is, of course, the one titled *Seasons in a Person's Life* (ch. 3:1-15).

"There is an appointed time for everything, a time for every affair under the heavens." (v.1)

"God has made everything appropriate to its time, and has put the timeless into their hearts, without men ever discovering from beginning to end, the work which God has done." (v.11)

"I recognized that there is nothing better than to be glad and do well during life. For everyman, moreover, to eat and drink and enjoy the fruit of all his labor is a gift of God." (vv 12-13)

"And I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to rejoice in his work; for this is his lot." (v.22)

Verses 1-15—Seasons. Now we come to some of the best known verses not only in this book but in the whole Bible and in all sacred books that deal with the seasons in a person's life. The text lists 14 pairs of opposites, e.g., to be born and to die, to kill and to heal, to love and to hate, and so on. Some of the seasons might scandalize us, such as "a time to kill" and "a time to hate." While the Fifth Commandment says, "*You shall not kill*" (Ex 20:13), the Book of the Covenant (Ex. 21-24) acknowledges that there is an appropriate time to kill: "*Whoever strikes another man a mortal blow must be put to death.*" And the psalmist has no problem "hating" God's enemies. Where Qoheleth differs from the rest of biblical tradition is in his lack of confidence that human beings can know the right time to hate and kill, etc. Since people cannot figure out God's mind, what are they to do? Qoheleth responds by reiterating his earlier message that they should eat, drink, and enjoy life and the fruit of their work—as a gift from God (v.13).

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 to enjoy our life, celebrate, dress up, wear perfume, and enjoy our spouse.

In **Chapter 12**, Qoheleth, now an old man, uses rich imagery to describe his life as the sunset settles down upon it. The *Collegeville Commentary* reads:

Qoheleth stands at the end of the road. He is like an old man wandering into a silenced village. The sun has gone behind the clouds, the menservants stand bent over, the women waiting at the mill are few, the ladies in the house only occasionally peek out of the windows. The doors of houses are closed; the birds do not sing; the old man totters along precariously as though on a precipice, fearing a mugging; the trees blossom but do no more. And as he passes through this silent village, he arrives finally at the well, the center of town. But no one is trading news at the well. As he looks at this source of life—for good water is called living water—he sees the whole apparatus of pulley, bucket, and counterbalance fall into the pit as the rope breaks. Need anything more be said?

“And the dust returns to earth as it once was, and the life breath returns to God who gave it” (12:7).

Qoheleth shrieks for some greater knowledge. Faith says that life is safe in the hands of the Life-giver. But how? And why? (p.820)

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.

SONG OF SONGS

This short book of love poems is unlike any other book in the Bible. It is 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.

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).