

Understanding and Applying Wisdom Literature

By Bob Young

Introduction

If you could describe one goal or summary of your life, what would it be? There are many options. My summary today may seem strange, but after almost half a century of thinking about the answer, here is one very good option: **I want to life a wise life.**

Examples of wisdom literature; what is wisdom literature?

Proverbs: Vertical Living in a Horizontal World

Proverbs: Spiritual Living in a Secular World

James: Authentic Living in a Shadowy World

Wisdom Literature Introduced

Wisdom. What is it? How do you define it?

An entire genre/type of literature is designated by the name: wisdom literature. What do you think of?

Maybe you think of five books in the OT—Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Eccl, Song of Songs.

Wisdom literature is a literary type that is broader than those five books, extending to literature outside the Bible. In the Hebrew Bible, “the writings” includes more than the five books we usually put in our category: add Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, and Lamentations. There are many examples of NT Wisdom Literature, including the Sermon on the Mount, parables, book of James, and brief sections in other NT books, especially the hymns and poetry.

If we were to try to find and understand wisdom by reading wisdom literature, we would have a big job. Wisdom literature is a broad genre. The wisdom literature of the OT is echoed in the wisdom literature of the Ancient Near East. Proverbial, instructional wisdom literature was known in Egypt from the third millennium B.C. One relatively well known example is the Instruction of Amenemope from the first millennium B.C. Babylonian wisdom literature, e.g. Counsels of Wisdom, warn against the danger of dishonesty and unsuitable companions. There is no doubt that the OT wisdom tradition continues in NT.

Blenkinsopp (*Wisdom and Law in the Old Testament*) suggests that wisdom and law are two great rivers which eventually flow together and find their outlet in rabbinic writings and early Christian theology. He notes the formal similarities between case law and proverbial sayings (choppy, short sentences), and the parallels between apodictic sentences of law and the instruction of wisdom literature (in various forms, including “if...then”).

He suggests that Matthew in his Gospel intended to place the teaching of Jesus within the ongoing tradition of Israelite and Jewish wisdom. In fact, of the biblical gospels, Matthew seems most interested in presenting Jesus as the wise teacher. Matthew organizes Jesus' teachings into five discourses, perhaps modeled on the Pentateuch. The first of these, the Sermon on the Mount, concludes with the familiar contrast between the wise person and the fool, at least suggesting that the Sermon on the Mount is wisdom literature.

Harry Hunt, professor of Old Testament at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has noted that the role of the sage and the priest become more prominent as the role of the prophet becomes less visible during the intertestamental period. This he sees as a fitting bridge to the New Testament where the magi (sages or wise men) announce the birth of Christ, the one who is to become greatest of all wisdom teachers (cf. Mt. 12:42; 13:54).

Huber Drumwright, while Dean of the School of Theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, noted,

"There is in the Sermon on the Mount the clearest and fullest approach to the wisdom method to be found in the teachings of Jesus. The love of life and learning of large lessons with spiritual import from nature, both of which characterize the sages of the OT, are evidenced in Jesus' longest sermon of record. Even the short, pithy, sometimes antithetical method of the wisdom writers seems to have been employed by Jesus."

Wisdom Literature is to be applied

Because wisdom literature is an unfamiliar genre to many in our contemporary world, the application of wisdom literature in today's world is often difficult.

-1- The general theme of wisdom literature is authentic living. Wisdom literature addresses practical truths and resulting values. It addresses behavior with direct examples.

- Authentic living contrasts to a world of shadows that is never a dependable version of reality.
- Authentic living is to be measured by eternal spiritual realities more than secular which are temporal, 2 Cor. 4:16-18.
- The first priority of life is one's vertical relationship, which will set correctly all of the other relationships of this life, which exist in the horizontal realm. I like to call it vertical wisdom for horizontal living.

-2- Wisdom literature is often characterized by sets of contrasts [James 1:2-8]

- Wise man and fool
- Faith and doubt
- Light and shadow
- The rememberer and the forgetter
- Rich and poor
- The sayer and the doer
- Two fountains—sweet water and bitter water
- Worldly wisdom and wisdom from above

That is just a quick survey of the first part of the book. You could find similar lists if you were to read other wisdom sections, either in the OT or NT.

-3- A common topic in wisdom literature is priorities. What is the focus of my life? What shall I run after? What do I seek?

John Updike, in "The Bulgarian's Poetess," writes, "Actuality is a running impoverishment of possibility." On many days life resembles Monty Hall's "Let's make a deal." Which door will we choose? What shall we do? By what power will we accomplish it?

Solomon, allowed by God to choose one thing, chose wisdom. His wisdom is reflected in OT literature, especially Ecclesiastes and portions of Proverbs. According to Ecclesiastes, Solomon tried many things to give life meaning, but found them fleeting, a chasing after wind, emptiness, and vanity. This is a hard lesson for us.

I am reminded of Billy Crystal and the movie "City Slickers." What do you do, where do you go, how do you respond when life is boring, routine, and meaningless, and you are caught up in sameness? Crystal's character in the movie leaves the corporate world to be part of a cattle drive. There he meets Curly, played by Jack Valance. One memorable scene from the movie has Curly saying that all of life is summed up in finding that "one thing." That life is about finding "one thing" speaks to our priorities.

The statement reminds of Paul in Philippians 3 when he in a similar statement paraphrased here says, "I am focused on one thing, one thing I do. I forget the past, I forge on to the future, because there is a prize there worth more than anything else."

In the teachings of Jesus, the same truth is present in the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (Matthew 13).

-4- Another way of saying something about priorities is to ask, "What matters?"

Few tasks are more difficult than discerning what matters, what is important, to what we have been called. We are surrounded by the siren songs of multiplied missions, opportunities, numberless challenges, and pressing needs. What shall we do? Where shall we spend our time? The trivia of the urgent often finds actuality impoverishing possibility. To turn from the trivia of the urgent to the priority of the essential is a first step toward wisdom.

Conclusion

How will we get it all done? Where can we find refuge, focus, direction, priority? Jesus says these are kingdom issues (Matt 6:33-34). Our answers are in the kingdom, not in the material world. Merely quoting verses provides no panacea. The passage demands interpretation, because Jesus responds to our questions with the same words, "Seek first kingdom things." Can following Jesus really be that demanding? Are priorities really that important?

Wisdom literature sharpens our focus and defines our priorities. Where is my focus--on Jesus or self? What do I think about? For Christians, this is a special problem, for our life is often wrapped up in "kingdom things." Our very life is "kingdom things"--at least we can rationalize it so. Can we really be focused on kingdom things if we are not focused on Jesus Christ, the king? Can we really be focused on kingdom things if we rely on our own abilities to get tasks done?

My purpose in this sermon is not to identify your kingdom things. My task is to remind you that all of life is in finding your one thing--"your kingdom things"--and pursuing it. Pursue it according to your talents, abilities, inclinations, personality, preferences, and opportunities. But pursue it trusting in God's power, not your own. Find your kingdom role; seek God's power to fulfill that role. Today I will seek God's will and God's way by God's power, for today. Tomorrow will take care of itself. That is the life of wisdom.