

CHAPTER 12

Wisdom: Then and Now

Hebrew wisdom is a category of literature that is unfamiliar to most present-day Christians. Though a significant portion of the Old Testament is devoted to wisdom writings, contemporary believers sometimes either misunderstand or misapply this material, losing benefits that God intended for them. When properly understood and used, however, wisdom is a helpful resource for Christian living. When misused, it can provide a basis for selfish, materialistic, shortsighted behavior — just the opposite of what God intended.

Three Old Testament books are commonly classified under the category of “wisdom”: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. In addition, as we noted in the preceding chapter, a number of the psalms are often classified in this category. Finally, Song of Songs (sometimes called Song of Solomon), can also come under the category of wisdom, as we will point out below. Not everything in these books is, strictly speaking, concerned with wisdom; nevertheless, they in general contain the type of material that bears the wisdom label.

THE NATURE OF WISDOM

What exactly is wisdom, biblically speaking? A brief definition runs as follows: “Wisdom is the ability to make godly choices in life.” You achieve this goal by applying God’s truth to your life, so that your choices will indeed be godly. This sounds reasonable enough, and not the sort of thing that should confuse Christians. The problem arises when the Old Testament wisdom material is misunderstood, and thus misapplied. In such cases people will often make choices that are not always godly. This chapter intends to help you refine your understanding and application of wisdom. To get there we begin with some common abuses — how not to read and use this literature.

Abuse of Wisdom Literature

Traditionally, the wisdom books have been misused in three ways:

1. People often read these books only in bits and pieces and thus fail to see that they have an overall message. Snatches of wisdom teaching taken out of context can sound profound and seem practical, which often results in misapplication. Take, for example, the phrase in Ecclesiastes that there is “a time to be born and a time to die” (3:2). This is part of a lyrical poem set in the context of the transitory/elusive nature of human life; it is about how the ebb and flow of human life and activity are set by God and thus outside of human control — since all die when their “time” comes, no matter how bad or good their life is. Unfortunately, some Christians have thought that this very human observation was intended to teach that God protectively picks out our life span for us; but in context, this is definitely *not* what this author was saying.

2. People sometimes misunderstand the terms and categories of Hebrew wisdom, as well as its styles and literary modes; this also can lead to misuse. Consider this proverb, for example, “Stay away from a fool, for you will not find knowledge on their lips” (14:7). What is a contemporary Christian to do with this? Does this mean that followers of Jesus should choose not to associate with those who have mental disabilities or are uneducated or mentally ill? Of course not! That would indeed make fools of us in the more modern sense! In Proverbs, however, “fool” is basically a referent to someone whom today we might refer to as an “infidel” — the person who lives life according to selfish, indulgent whims and who acknowledges no higher authority than oneself. And the “staying away” is inextricably linked with the purpose (“for you will not find knowledge”). In other words, the proverb teaches that if you are seeking knowledge, you should not look for it in the “fool” — the one who lives life apart from God (Pss 14:1; 53:1).

3. Especially in a wisdom discourse like Job, people often fail to understand what the book is all about, and thus also fail to follow the line of argument. Accordingly, they cite as biblical truth what was intended by this great author as an *incorrect* understanding of life. Consider these words, in this case, coming from one of Job’s so-called “comforters”: “All his days the wicked man suffers torment, the ruthless man through all the years stored up for him” (15:20). Would you take this to be an inspired teaching that evil people cannot really be happy? Job himself did not! Indeed, he energetically refuted it. These words are part of a speech by Job’s self-appointed “comforter” Eliphaz, who is trying to convince Job that the reason he is suffering so much is the direct result of some evil on his part.

Later in the book God vindicates the words of Job and condemns the words of Eliphaz (42:7 – 8). But unless you follow the *whole* discourse of Job, you will not know this, and thus perhaps both misunderstand and misapply what this “comforter” has mistakenly assumed to be true of Job.

Our procedure in this chapter will be to discuss what wisdom literature is and what it is not, and then to make some observations about how to understand these books on their own terms and thus to use them well. We will pay most attention to Proverbs, because it is the book we judge to be used the most often and therefore most often *misused* (abused?). Indeed, our experience is that many contemporary Christians tend to avoid reading either Job or Ecclesiastes.

Who Is Wise?

We began by noting that “wisdom” is the ability to make godly choices in life. There is thus a personal side to wisdom. Wisdom is not something theoretical and abstract — it is something that exists only when a *person* thinks and acts according to truth when making the many choices that life demands. The Old Testament recognizes, therefore, that some people have more wisdom than others and that some people have so devoted themselves to gaining wisdom that they themselves can be called “wise” (Hebrew *ḥākām*). The wise person was highly practical, not merely theoretical. Such a person was interested in being able to formulate the sorts of plans — that is, make the sorts of choices — that would help produce God’s desired results in their life.

There is a very real sense in which the entire progress of our lives may be viewed as the result of choices. In fact, almost everything we do is to some degree a matter of choice. When

to get up in the morning, what to do first, where to work, whom to speak to, how to speak to them, what to accomplish, when to start and stop things, what to eat, what to wear, whom to associate with, where to go, with whom to go — all these actions are the result of decisions. Some of the decisions are made on the spot (what to have for lunch, for example); others may have been made long ago so that they need not be remade daily (where to live, whom to marry, what kind of work to engage in). Others may be the result of God's choices and not our own (Gen 45:8), while yet others may be only partly voluntary on our part (Prov 16:33). Nevertheless, choices chart the course of life.

The ancients knew this, and thus wisdom literature abounded in most ancient cultures. Non-Israelite wisdom also had as its goal the making of the best choices, the purpose being to achieve the best life. What the inspired biblical wisdom added to this was the crucial idea that the only good choices are godly choices. Thus from the faithful Israelite perspective, "*the fear of the LORD* is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 9:10; Ps 111:10 [emphasis added]), which does not mean, of course, to be "afraid" of God, but to understand and approach God full of awe and wonder. After all, how can you make godly choices if you do not believe and obey God? The very first step, then, in biblical wisdom is knowing God — not abstractly or theoretically, but in the concrete sense of committing your life to God. Then your general direction will be correct, and as you learn specific guidelines and perspectives for making godly choices, a more precise sense of direction for wise living can follow.

Wisdom, therefore, as the Bible defines it (Hebrew *h*

okmāh) has nothing to do with IQ. It is not a matter of cleverness and quickness or skill in expression, or even age, though personal experience is a valuable teacher if interpreted in light of revealed truth. Rather, it is a matter of orientation to God, out of which comes the ability to please God, our heavenly Father. This is why in the New Testament James says that God gives wisdom to those who ask for it (1:5). This is a promise not that we can become smarter by prayer, but that God will help us to become more godly in our choices, if we ask. James defines the kind of wisdom God gives (Jas 3:13 – 18), and then goes on to contrast it with the worldly wisdom by which a person seeks to know how to get ahead of others.

Responsible, successful living was the goal. Sometimes such wisdom was applied to technical matters like construction (cf. Bezalel, the tabernacle architect, “filled . . . with the Spirit of God in wisdom” [Exod 31:3 NASB]) or navigation (Ezek 27:8 – 9). Wisdom was also sought by people who had to make decisions affecting the welfare of others. National leaders such as Joshua (Deut 34:9), David (2 Sam 14:20), and Solomon (1 Kgs 3:9; et al.) were described as having been given wisdom by God so that their rule might be effective and successful. We are reminded of the personal side of the skill of wise people by the fact that the human heart is described as the focal point of wisdom (cf. 1 Kgs 3:9, 12). The “heart” in the Old Testament refers to the moral and volitional faculties, as well as the intellectual.

Wisdom literature, then, tends to focus on people and their behavior — how successful they are at making godly choices and whether or not they are learning how to apply God’s truth to the experiences they have. It is not so much the case that people seek to learn how to *be* wise but rather that they seek to

get wise. Anyone who seeks to apply God's truth daily and learn from their experience can become wise eventually. But there is a great danger in seeking wisdom simply for one's own advantage or in a way that does not honor God above all: "Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes" (Isa 5:21). Moreover, God's wisdom always surpasses human wisdom (Isa 29:13 – 14; cf. 1 Cor 1:18 – 2:5).

Teachers of Wisdom

In ancient Israel, some individuals devoted themselves not only to gaining wisdom but also to teaching others how to gain it. These wisdom instructors were simply called "wise men" (1 Chron 27:32; Eccl 2:16) or "wise women" (2 Sam 20:16; Prov 14:1), though they eventually occupied a position in Israelite society somewhat parallel to that of the priest and the prophet (Jer 18:18). This special class of wise men and women arose at least as early as the beginning of the kingship period in Israel (i.e., about 1000 BC; cf. 1 Sam 14:2) and functioned as teacher-counselors to people who sought their wisdom. Some were inspired by God to help write portions of the Old Testament.

We note also that the wise person served as a sort of substitute parent to the person seeking wisdom from them. Even before the exodus from Egypt, Joseph was made by God a "father" to Pharaoh (Gen 45:8), and later the prophet Deborah is called a "mother" in Israel (Judg 5:7). Thus often in the book of Proverbs we see the wise teacher addressing their pupil as "my child" ("my son" is not the best translation). Parents sent their children to be educated in wisdom attitudes and lifestyles by such wisdom teachers, and these teachers taught their pupils as they would their own children.

Wisdom in the Home

Wisdom, however, has always been taught more at home than in any other setting. Modern parents teach their children all sorts of wisdom, virtually every day and often without realizing it, as they try to help them make the right choices in life. Whenever a parent gives a child rules to live by, from “Don’t play in the street” to “Try to choose nice friends” to “Be sure to dress warmly enough,” the parent is actually teaching wisdom. Most parents want their children to be happy, self-sufficient, and of benefit to others. A good parent spends time shaping the behavior of their children in this direction, talking to them regularly about how to behave. In Proverbs, especially, this same sort of practical advice is given. But Proverbs subordinates all its advice to God’s wisdom, just as a Christian parent should try to do. The advice may be strongly practical and concerned with secular issues, but it should never fail to acknowledge that the highest good a person can achieve is to do God’s will.

Wisdom among Colleagues

One way people refine their ability to make the right choices in life is by discussion and debate. This sort of wisdom is arrived at sometimes by lengthy discourse, either in a monologue intended for others to read and reflect on (e.g., Ecclesiastes) or in a dialogue among various persons seeking to inform each other’s opinions on truth and life (e.g., Job). The kind of wisdom that predominates in the book of Proverbs is called proverbial wisdom, whereas the kind found in Ecclesiastes and Job is usually called speculative wisdom. The kind found in Song of Songs may be called lyric wisdom. We will discuss these in more detail below. For now, just remember that even

so-called speculative wisdom is highly practical and empirical (centered in experience) rather than merely theoretical.

Wisdom Expressed through Poetry

Students and teachers alike in Old Testament times used a variety of literary techniques as aids to remembering their wisdom. God inspired the wisdom portions of the Bible according to such techniques, so that they might be learnable and easily memorized. As noted in the two preceding chapters, poetry has careful wordings, cadences, and stylistic qualities that make it easier to commit to memory than prose, and thus poetry also became the medium of Old Testament wisdom. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Song of Songs, as well as the wisdom psalms and other bits of wisdom in the Old Testament, are composed, therefore, mostly in poetry. Among the particular techniques used are parallelisms (cf. p. 205) — whether synonymous (e.g., Prov 7:4), antithetical (Prov 10:1), or synthetic (Prov 21:16); acrostics (Prov 31:10 – 31); alliteration (Eccl 3:1 – 8); numerical sequences (Prov 30:15 – 31); and countless comparisons (such as similes and metaphors, e.g., Job 32:19; Song 4:1 – 6). Formal parables, allegories, riddles, and other poetic techniques are also found in wisdom material.

The Limits of Wisdom

It is important to remember that not all wisdom in the ancient world was godly or orthodox. Throughout the ancient Near East there was a class of wise teachers and scribes who were supported, often by royalty, in the task of collecting, composing, and refining wisdom proverbs and discourses. Much of this wisdom generally resembles the Old Testament wisdom writings, though it lacks the firm emphasis on the Lord

as the origin of wisdom (Prov 2:5 – 6) and the purpose of wisdom as to please him (Prov 3:7).

Moreover, wisdom does not cover all of life. Intensely practical, it tends not to touch on the theological or historical issues so important elsewhere in the Bible. And skill at wisdom does not guarantee that it will be properly used. Jonadab's wise advice to Amnon (2 Sam 13:3) was rendered in an evil cause; Solomon's great wisdom (1 Kgs 3:12; 4:29 – 34) helped him gain wealth and power but could not keep him from turning away from faithfulness to the Lord in his later years (1 Kgs 11:4). Only when wisdom as a skill is subordinated to obedience to God does it achieve its proper ends in the Old Testament sense.

WISDOM IN PROVERBS

The book of Proverbs is the primary locus of “prudential wisdom” — that is, memorable aphorisms (maxims) people can use to help themselves make responsible choices in life. In contrast to Ecclesiastes and Job, which use *speculative* wisdom as a way of wrestling with the great issues of life, *proverbial* wisdom concentrates mostly on *practical attitudes and behavior in everyday life*. As a generalization, one can say that Proverbs teaches “old-fashioned basic values.” A good parent does not want their child to grow up unhappy, disappointed, lonely, socially rejected, in trouble with the law, immoral, inept, or broke. It is neither selfish nor unrealistic for a parent to wish a child a reasonable level of success in life — including social acceptance, moral uprightness, and freedom from want. The book of Proverbs provides a collection of pithy advisory statements designed to do just that. There is no guarantee, of course, that a life will always go well for a young

person. What Proverbs does say is that, all things being equal, there *are* basic attitudes and patterns of behavior that will help a person grow into responsible adulthood.

Proverbs continually presents a sharp contrast between choosing the life of wisdom and choosing the life of folly. What characterizes the life of folly? Such things as violent crime (1:10 – 19; 4:14 – 19), careless promising or pledging (6:1 – 5), laziness (6:7 – 11), malicious dishonesty (6:12 – 15), and sexual impurity, which is especially odious to God and harmful to an upright life (2:16 – 19; 5:3 – 20; 6:23 – 35; 7:4 – 27; 9:13 – 18; 23:26 – 28). Besides urging the opposites of these as the life of wisdom, Proverbs also urges such things as caring for the poor (2:22, 27), respect for government leaders (23:1 – 3; 24:21 – 22), the importance of disciplining children (23:13 – 14), moderation in consumption of alcoholic beverages (23:19 – 21, 29 – 35), and regard for one’s parents (23:22 – 25).

Specifically religious language is seldom used in Proverbs; it is present (cf. 1:7; 3:5 – 12; 15:3, 8 – 9, 11; 16:1 – 9; 22:9, 23; 24:18, 21; et al.), but it does not predominate. Not everything in life has to be *religious* to be godly. Indeed, Proverbs can help serve as a corrective to the extremist tendency to spiritualize everything, as though there were something wrong with the basic material, physical world, as though God had seen that it was “bad” rather than “good” when he first looked at the world he had created.

Uses and Abuses of Proverbs

The Hebrew word for proverbs is *mēšālîm*, having to do with “figures of speech,” “parables,” or “specially contrived sayings.” A proverb, therefore, is a *brief, particular* expression of a truth. The briefer a statement is, the less likely it is to be

totally precise and universally applicable. We know that long, highly qualified, elaborate, detailed statements of fact are often not only difficult to understand but very difficult to remember. The proverbs then are phrased in a catchy way, so as to be memorable. Indeed, in Hebrew many of the proverbs have some sort of rhythm, sound repetition, or vocabulary qualities that make them particularly easy to learn.

Consider the English proverbs “Look before you leap” and “A stitch in time saves nine.” The repetition of single-syllable words beginning with the letter *l* in the first case and the rhythm and rhyme of single-syllable words in the second case are elements that give these proverbs a certain catchiness. They are not as easy to forget as would be the following statements: “In advance of committing yourself to a course of action, consider your circumstances and options”; and “There are certain corrective measures for minor problems that, when taken early on in a course of action, forestall major problems from arising.” These latter formulations are more precise but lack the punch and effectiveness of the two well-known wordings, not to mention the fact that they are much harder to remember. “Look before you leap” is a pithy, inexact statement; it could easily be misunderstood, or thought to apply only to jumping. It does not say where or how to look, what to look for, or how soon to leap after looking, and it is not even intended to apply literally to jumping!

So it is with Hebrew proverbs. They must be understood reasonably and taken on their own terms. A proverb does not state everything about a truth, but rather points *toward* it. They are, taken literally, often technically inexact. But as learnable guidelines for the shaping of selected behavior, they are unsurpassed. Consider Proverbs 6:27 – 29:

27 Can a man scoop fire into his lap
without his clothes being burned?

28 Can a man walk on hot coals
without his feet being scorched?

29 So is he who sleeps with another man's
wife;
no one who touches her will go
unpunished.

Taken in isolation, the last line could be easily misapplied: What if someone accidentally touches another man's wife — will he be punished? Or, what about people who commit adultery and get away with it? But such “interpretations” quite miss the point. First, this last line concludes a couplet in which the second line is to be understood in light of the first one (see p. 214). Second, proverbs tend to use *figurative* language and express things *suggestively* rather than in detail. The word “touches” in this line is clearly a euphemism for sexual relations (cf. Gen 20:6; 1 Cor 7:1; see pp. 242 – 49). The point you should get from the whole proverb is that committing adultery is like playing with fire. God will see to it that sooner or later, in this life or the next, the adulterer will be hurt by their actions. To take it otherwise is to distort the Holy Spirit's inspired message. Thus a proverb should not be taken too literally or too universally if its message is to be helpful.

For another example, consider Proverbs 9:13 – 18:

13 Folly is an unruly woman;
she is simple and knows nothing.

14 She sits at the door of her house,
on a seat at the highest point of the
city,

15 calling out to those who pass by,
who go straight on their way,

16 “Let all who are simple come to my
house!”

To those who have no sense she says,

17 “Stolen water is sweet;
food eaten in secret is delicious!”

18 But little do they know that the dead are
there,

that her guests are deep in the realm of
the dead.

This pithy proverb includes a whole allegory (a story pointing to something other than itself by implicit comparisons) in a few verses. Here folly, the opposite of wise living, is personified as a prostitute trying to entice passersby

into her house. The fool is characterized by his fascination with forbidden pleasures (v. 17). But the end result of a life of folly is not long life, success, or happiness — it is death. “Stay away from folly!” is the message of this brief allegory. “Don’t be taken in! Walk right past those temptations [spelled out in various ways in other proverbs] that folly makes seem attractive!” The wise, godly, moral person will choose a life free from the selfishness of folly. Proverbs like this are somewhat like parables in that they express their truth in a symbolic way.

Another example can be found a bit later in a well-known and often cited proverb:

Commit to the LORD whatever you do,
and your plans will succeed.

Prov 16:3 (NIV 1984)

This is the sort of proverb that is most often misinterpreted. Not realizing that proverbs tend to be inexact statements pointing to the truth in figurative ways, people often assume that this is a direct, clear-cut, always applicable promise from God — that if a person dedicates their plans to God, those plans *must* succeed. People who reason this way, of course, may all too often be disappointed. They can dedicate some perfectly selfish or idiotic scheme to God, then if it happens to succeed, even briefly, they can assume that God blessed it. A hasty marriage, a rash business decision, an ill-thought-out vocational decision — all can be dedicated to God but can eventually result in misery. Or a person might commit a plan to God only to have it fail; then the person would wonder why God did not keep his promise, why he went back on his

inspired word. In either case they have failed to see that the proverb is not a categorical, always applicable, ironclad promise, but a more general truth; it teaches that lives committed to God and lived according to his will succeed *according to God's definition of success*. Thus the NIV renders line 2 as “and he will establish your plans.” But according to the world's definition of success, the result may be just the opposite. The story of Job eloquently reminds us of this.

When these proverbs, then, are taken on their own terms and understood as the special category of suggestive, general truth that they are, they become important and useful adjuncts for living.

SOME HERMENEUTICAL GUIDELINES

Here, then, in capsule form are some summary guidelines for understanding proverbial wisdom.

1. Proverbs Are Not Legal Guarantees from God

Proverbs set forth a wise way to approach certain selected practical goals, but do so in terms that cannot be treated like a divine guarantee of success. The particular blessings, rewards, and opportunities mentioned in Proverbs are *likely* to follow if one will choose the wise courses of action outlined in the poetic, figurative language of the book. But nowhere does Proverbs teach *automatic* success. Remember that inspired

Scripture also includes both Ecclesiastes and Job, which remind us that there is very little that is automatic about the good or bad events that may take place in our lives.

Consider these examples:

Do not be one who shakes hands in pledge,
or puts up security for debts;
if you lack the means to pay,
your very bed will be snatched from
under you.

Proverbs 22:26 – 27

If a ruler listens to lies,
all his officials become wicked.

Proverbs 29:12

The LORD tears down the house of the
proud,
but he sets the widow's boundary
stones in place.

Proverbs 15:25

If you were to take the extreme step of considering the first of these as an all-encompassing command from God, you might not buy a house so as never to incur a mortgage (a secured

debt). Or you might assume that God promises that if you default on something like a credit card debt, you will eventually lose all your possessions — including your bed(s). Such literalistic, extreme interpretations would miss the point of the proverb, which states poetically and figuratively that *debts should be taken on cautiously because foreclosure can be very painful*. The proverb frames this truth in specific, narrow terms (shaking hands, losing a bed, etc.) that are intended to point toward the broader principle rather than to express something technically. In Bible times, righteous people incurred debts without any violation of this proverb because they understood its real point.

The second example (29:12) is also not to be taken literally. It does not guarantee, for example, that if you are a government official, you have no choice but to become wicked if your boss (the governor, president, or whoever) listens to some people who do not tell him the truth. It intends to convey a different message: Rulers who want to hear lies instead of the truth will gather people around them who will say what they want to hear. And the end result can be a corrupt government. Thus the ruler who insists on hearing the truth, even though it is painful, helps keep the government honest. The words of the proverb point to this principle in a parabolic way rather than in a literal, technical sense.

The third example (15:25) is perhaps the most obviously nonliteral in intention. We know both from our own experience and from the witness of the Scriptures that there are indeed proud people whose houses are still standing and that there are widows who have been abused by greedy creditors or by fraud (cf. Mark 12:40; Job 24:2 – 3; et al.). So what does the proverb mean if it does not intend to convey the impression

that the Lord is actually a house smasher or boundary guard? It means that God opposes the proud and is on the side of the needy (“widows,” “the fatherless,” and “foreigners” are terms that stand for *all* dependent people; cf. Deut 14:29; 16:11; 26:12, 13; et al.). When this proverb is compared with other moments in Scripture (Proverbs 23:10 – 11 and Luke 1:52 – 53), its meaning becomes much clearer. It is a miniature parable designed by the Holy Spirit to point beyond the “house” and the “widow” to the general principle that God will *eventually* right this world’s wrongs, abasing the arrogant and compensating those who have suffered for the sake of righteousness (cf. Matt 5:3 – 4).

2. Proverbs Must Be Read as a Collection

Each inspired proverb must be balanced with others and understood in comparison with the rest of Scripture. As the third example above (15:25) illustrates, the more one reads a proverb in isolation, the less clear its interpretation may be. An individual proverb, if misunderstood, may lead you to attitudes or behavior far more inappropriate than would be the case if you read Proverbs as a whole. Moreover, you must guard against letting their intensely practical concern with material things and this world make you forget the balancing value of other Scriptures that warn against materialism and worldliness. Do not engage in the kind of wisdom Job’s friends did, equating worldly success with righteousness in God’s eyes.

This is an unbalanced reading of selected proverbs. Do not try to find in Proverbs justification for living a selfish life or for practices that do not comport with what the Scriptures teach otherwise. And remember that the proverbs are often grouped in various ways, so that one jumps from topic to topic in reading through them.

Consider also these two proverbs:

One who is wise can go up against the city
of the mighty
and pull down the stronghold in which
they trust.

Proverbs 21:22

The mouth of an adulterous woman is a
deep pit;
a man who is under the LORD's wrath
falls into it.

Proverbs 22:14

If you are wise, do you go out to attack a well-defended city and thereby do something good for God? If you have displeased God, is there a danger that you will suffocate inside the (very large) mouth of an adulteress?

Most people would answer no to these questions, adding "Whatever they mean, they can't mean that!" But many of the same people will insist that a following proverb (22:26) is to be

taken literally to prohibit borrowing on the part of Christians, or that an earlier proverb about children obeying their parents (6:20) means that a person must always obey his or her parents *at any age, no matter how wrong the advice of the parents may be*. By failing to balance proverbs against one another and against the rest of Scripture (let alone common sense) people can do themselves and others great injustice, not to mention harm.

In the first proverb above (21:22), the point is that wisdom can be stronger even than military might. This is a hyperbolic statement. In style it is not unlike the modern proverb, “The pen is mightier than the sword.” It is not a command. It is a symbolic, figurative portrayal of the power of wisdom. Only when one relates this proverb to the many other proverbs that praise the usefulness and effectiveness of wisdom (e.g., 1:1 – 6; chs. 2 – 3; 8; 22:17 – 29; et al.) does one get its message. Here *overall context* is crucial in the interpretation.

The other proverb cited above (22:14) likewise needs comparison to its overall context. A large number of proverbs stress the importance of careful thought and speech (e.g., 15:1; 16:10, 21, 23 – 24, 27 – 28; 18:4; et al.). What one says, in other words, is usually far more incriminating than what one hears (cf. Matt 15:11, 15 – 20). You may not be able to control what you hear, but you can almost always control what you say. This particular proverb can be paraphrased as follows: “What an adulteress practices and talks about are as dangerous to you as falling into a deep pit would be. Avoid such circumstances if you wish to avoid God’s wrath.” An appreciation of the full contexts of the individual proverbs will help to interpret and apply them well.

3. Proverbs Are Worded to Be Memorable, Not to Be Theoretically Accurate

No proverb is a complete statement of truth. No proverb is so perfectly worded that it can stand up to the unreasonable demand that it apply in every situation at every time. The more briefly and parabolically a principle is stated, the more common sense and good judgment are needed to interpret it properly — but the more effective and memorable it is (cf. the example, “Look before you leap,” cited above). Proverbs try to impart knowledge that can be *retained* rather than philosophy that can impress a critic. Thus the proverbs are designed either to stimulate an image in your mind (the mind remembers images better than it remembers abstract data) or to include sounds pleasing to the ear (i.e., repetitions, assonance, acrostics, et al.). As an example of the use of imagery, consider the following proverb (15:19):

The way of the sluggard is blocked with
thorns,
but the path of the upright is a highway.

Here we read language designed to point not to the types of plants found in certain lazy people’s favorite routes but to point beyond itself to the principle that diligence is better than sloth.

The portrayal of extreme devotion of the wife of noble character described in the epilogue or closing frame of the book (31:10 – 31) is the result of an acrostic ordering. Each

verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, memorable and pleasing to the ear in Hebrew, but resulting in what could seem to the callous critic or the literalistic reader to be a pattern of life impossible for any mortal woman to follow. But if one gets the point that such a description as Proverbs 31:22 is purposely designed to emphasize by exaggeration the joy that a good wife brings to her family and community, the proverbial wisdom does its job admirably well. The words (and images) of the passage tend to stick with the reader, providing useful guidance when needed. That is what proverbs are intended by God to do.

4. Some Proverbs Need to Be “Translated” to Be Appreciated

A good many proverbs express their truths according to practices and institutions that no longer exist, although they were common to the Old Testament Israelites. Unless you think of these proverbs in terms of their true modern equivalents (i.e., carefully “translate” them into practices and institutions that exist today), their meaning may seem irrelevant or be lost to you altogether (cf. ch. 4). Consider these two examples:

One who loves a pure heart and who speaks
with grace

will have the king for a friend.

Proverbs 22:11

Better to live on a corner of the roof

than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.

Proverbs 25:24

Most of us do not live in societies where there are kings. And we do not have the flat-roof houses of Bible times, where lodging on a roof was not only possible but common (cf. Josh 2:6). Does reading these proverbs therefore constitute a waste of time? Not at all, if one can only see the transcultural issues expressed in their culturally specific language. The essential message of the first example cited above (22:11) is easy to comprehend as long as we recognize that a true modern equivalent for “have the king for his friend” would be something like “make a positive impression on people in leadership positions.” The proverb *always* meant that anyway. The “king” stands as a synecdoche (one of a class) for all leaders. The specific parabolic language of the proverb is intended to point beyond itself to the truth that leaders and responsible persons are generally impressed both by honesty and by careful discourse.

The meaning of the second proverb above (25:24) is also not so difficult to discern if one makes the necessary “translation” from that culture to ours. We could even paraphrase: “It’s better to live in a garage than in a spacious house with a woman you never should have married.” Here one needs to remember that the advice of most proverbs is given as if to young persons starting out in life. The proverb is not intended to suggest literally what to do if you, a male, find your wife to be quarrelsome. It is intended to advise that people be careful in the selection of a mate. Such a selection is a

transcultural decision for which the proverb, correctly understood, provides sound, godly advice (cf. Matt 19:3 – 11; 1 Cor 7:1 – 14, 25 – 40). Everyone should recognize that a hasty marriage, based largely on physical attraction, can turn out to be an unhappy marriage.

For convenience, we conclude by listing in summary form some rules that will help you make proper use of proverbs and be true to their divinely inspired intent.

1. Proverbs are often parabolic (i.e., figurative, pointing beyond themselves).
2. Proverbs are intensely practical, not theoretically theological.
3. Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not technically precise.
4. Proverbs are not designed to support selfish behavior—just the opposite!
5. Proverbs strongly reflecting ancient culture may need sensible “translation” so as not to lose their meaning.
6. Proverbs are not guarantees from God but poetic guidelines for good behavior.
7. Proverbs may use highly specific language, exaggeration, or any of a variety of literary techniques to make their point.
8. Proverbs give good advice for wise approaches to certain aspects of life but are not exhaustive in their coverage.
9. Wrongly used, proverbs may justify a crass, materialistic lifestyle. Rightly used, proverbs will provide practical

advice for daily living.

WISDOM IN JOB

The book of Job is one of the greatest literary treasures in the world. It comes to us as a carefully structured dialogue between Job and his well-meaning but desperately wrong “comforters” — Bildad, Zophar, Eliphaz, and Elihu. But if one does not pay attention to who is speaking at any given point, you will find here all sorts of wrong advice and incorrect conclusions, especially if what is said comes from the lips of any of Job’s comforters. This dialogue has a very important goal: to establish convincingly in the mind of the reader that what happens in life does not always happen either because God desires it or because it is fair. The “foil” for this truth is to be found primarily in the advice of the comforters. They regularly represent the viewpoint that God is not simply involved in the daily affairs of life but that God is in fact constantly meting out his judgment through the events of this life. Indeed, they say to Job that what happens to anyone in life — good or ill — is a *direct* result of whether that person has pleased God or not. They are horrified when Job protests that he did nothing wrong to deserve the sorts of miseries (illness, bereavement, impoverishment) that have struck him. Their message is that when life goes well for a person, it is a sign that they have chosen to do what is good, but when things go badly, surely the person has sinned against God and God has responded by imposing affliction.

Jesus’ disciples were capable of this sort of logic (John 9:1 – 3), as are many Christians today. It seems so natural to assume that if God is in control of the world, everything that

happens must be God's doing, according to God's will. We must remember, however, that the Scriptures do not teach us this. They teach rather that the world is fallen, corrupted by sin, and under the domination of Satan (cf. John 12:31), and that many things happen in life that are not as God wishes them to be. Specifically, suffering is not necessarily the result of sin (cf. Rom 8:18 – 23).

In order to read the book in keeping with its own purposes, you may wish to consult *How to 2*, pages 121 – 24. Job, a godly man, knew that he had done nothing to deserve the wrath of God. In his frequent speeches (chs. 3; 6 – 7; 9 – 10; 12 – 14; 16 – 17; 19; 21; 23 – 24; 26 – 31) he asserts his innocence eloquently and also expresses his frustration at the horrors he has had to endure. He cannot understand why such things have happened to him. His colleagues are horrified to hear such talk — to them it is blasphemy. They persist at trying to convince him that he is offending God by his protestations. One by one they urge him repeatedly to confess his sin — whatever it is — and admit that God administers a fair and just world in which we get what our choices deserve. Just as tenaciously, and even more eloquently, Job argues that life is unfair, that the world as it is now is not the way it ought to be.

Elihu, the final “comforter” to arrive on the scene, defends God's superior knowledge and ways. This is the closest to an answer for Job that anyone has yet been able to provide, and it looks as though Job is going to have to settle for Elihu's partly satisfying, partly infuriating answer, when suddenly God himself speaks to Job and the others (chs. 38 – 41). God both corrects Job and puts the situation in perspective, but he also vindicates Job over against the “wisdom” of his colleagues (42:7 – 9). As to the question of whether everything in life is

fair or not, Job had prevailed; it is not. As to Job's wondering, *Why me?* God had prevailed; his ways are far above our ways, and his allowing suffering in our lives does not mean that he does not know what he is doing or that his right to do it should be questioned. His choices are always superior to ours.

This is true wisdom at its finest. The reader of the book of Job learns what is simply the world's wisdom — seemingly logical but actually wrong — and what constitutes God's wisdom and builds confidence in God's sovereignty and righteousness. Thus the dialogue and the storyline combine to produce the Old Testament's paramount exemplar of speculative wisdom.

As you read Job, be sure not to miss the overall structure of the book. The poetic dialogues of the book (3:1 – 42:6) are framed by a prose prologue (chs. 1 – 2) that tells you in advance why Job was tested so severely (God planned it all so that Job's refusal to give up on God would honor God and thwart the adversary, Satan) and by a prose epilogue (42:7 – 17) in which Job is openly vindicated and rewarded, in direct contrast to his comforters. This framing structure gives the reader information that Job and his comforters lacked as they debated. It doesn't "spoil" the story, but it helps one keep the story in proper perspective: this is not just a story about someone's suffering, but about God's gracious superintendence of suffering and the way that innocent suffering can truly glorify God (1 Pet 2:20).

WISDOM IN ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes is a wisdom monologue that often puzzles Christians, especially if they read it amiss and assume that

fair or not, Job had prevailed; it is not. As to Job's wondering, *Why me?* God had prevailed; his ways are far above our ways, and his allowing suffering in our lives does not mean that he does not know what he is doing or that his right to do it should be questioned. His choices are always superior to ours.

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WISDOM IN ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes is a wisdom monologue that often puzzles Christians, especially if they read it amiss and assume that

because it is Scripture everything said here is from God's perspective. There is good reason for the reader to be puzzled, because Ecclesiastes is a very difficult book to read, with several passages that seem self-contradictory and others that seem contradictory to the whole of biblical revelation.

This confusion has led to polar-opposite interpretations, as can be seen from two of the recommended commentaries in the appendix (whose authors happen to be close friends with one another). Professor Longman (along with one of us) understands most of Ecclesiastes to be an expression of cynical wisdom, which serves as a kind of “foil” regarding an outlook on life that should be avoided; Professor Provan (along with the other one of us) understands the book more positively, as an expression of how one should enjoy life under God in a world in which all die in the end. This latter point of view is the one you will find in *How to 2*, pages 154 – 60. It is important for you, therefore, in approaching Ecclesiastes to have an overall strategy for reading it. And whatever else, it is imperative here — as with Proverbs and Job — that you not take phrases and lines out of their context and give them a meaning that lies quite outside the author's purpose.

Thus an important part of reading the book's assertions in their proper context is to appreciate its structure. We have already pointed out that the book of Job is framed by a prologue and epilogue, which are different in kind from the dialogues placed between them. Something similar is true of Ecclesiastes as well. The opening prologue (1:1 – 11) and the closing epilogue (12:8 – 14) are written *about* the “Teacher” (Hebrew *qōhelet* = “congregation gatherer”), not *by* him. The Teacher speaks in the first person, whereas the prologue and epilogue speak about him in the third person. They frame what

the Teacher says both by summarizing his message (note how similar 1:2 and 12:8 are as these introduce the opening and closing parts of the frame) and by informing the reader that what the Teacher says can be very valuable for learning wisdom (12:9 – 11). But the wise reader must not take the Teacher's specific conclusions as the final word. The final, proper perspective is the overview provided by the last two verses of the epilogue (12:13 – 14), including "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind."

At issue ultimately in reading Ecclesiastes — both in the case of the frame and also the Teacher's words — is to come to terms with the frequently used and very important word *hebel* ("vanity," NRSV; "meaningless," NIV; "futility," NJB), which occurs thirty-seven times in this book (out of seventy-three in the entire OT). The word itself means "vapor" or "breath/wisp of air" (cf. Ps 39:5; Prov 31:30; Isa 57:13). But the question is, what does it mean for the Teacher? Does he intend it to go in the direction of the ephemeral/fleeting nature of all things? Or does he intend it to be a way of speaking about the "meaninglessness/uselessness" of all things? Or is it perhaps a bit of both?

How one answers this question depends in part on how one understands the other things that the Teacher says in the purposely rambling style that makes up the heart of the book. Five realities dominate his thinking: (1) God is the single, indisputable reality, the Creator of all and the One from whom all of life comes as a gift, including its — for the Teacher — burdensome nature; (2) God's ways are not always, if ever, understandable; (3) on the human side, "what is done under the sun" doesn't add up at all, in that the way things should be are not always — if ever — the way things actually are; (4)

most things that happen are just repetitive, part of the endless cyclical flow of life (“there is nothing new under the Sun,” the ancient equivalent of “same old, same old”). And, even worse, they don’t last long enough to count for much (the *hebel*, vapor, vanishes quickly); (5) the great equalizer is death, which happens to all people alike. At the heart of all this is the Teacher’s lack of hope in a resurrection of the dead. Once dead, that’s it; and this is what makes life itself seem so *hebel* (“fleeting” and therefore sometimes also “in vain”).

The Teacher’s own point seems to be that, even if the only real certainty about this present life is the certainty of the grave, one should still live life, *hebel* as it is, as a gift from God (e.g., 3:12 – 14). Thus all is not lost, even in his frequently despairing outlook. Joy in this life does not come ultimately from “getting” (securing profit from what one does), but in the journey itself, the life that God has given. In such a world, joy and satisfaction are to be found in living the rhythms of life without trying to be in control or to “make gain” of what is merely transitory.

In spite of this more positive assessment of the Teacher’s message than is often made, however, one can look at much of his opinion of life as a foil (i.e., as a contrast to what the rest of the Bible teaches). By this understanding of how the book teaches wisdom, the final part of the frame, Ecclesiastes 12:13 – 14, can be seen as concluding the book with a corrective, orthodox warning:

Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:

Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.

For God will bring every deed into
judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil.

According to the foil theory, the bulk of the book — everything but the frame (the prologue and epilogue) represents a brilliant, artful argument for the way one would still find positive things to look at in life *if* God played a more distant role and *if* there were no life after death. If you are looking for a prescription for living in a deistic world with no afterlife — a world where there is a God, but he leaves people pretty much alone to live and die by their own devices — Ecclesiastes provides it. The aim of the book, by this understanding, is to represent the sort of “wisdom” that Solomon could produce after he had degenerated from orthodoxy (1 Kgs 11:1 – 13), a view of life that is supposed to leave you cold because, in spite of its evident divine providences, it remains relatively fatalistic and discouraging — and therefore makes you long for the alternative of a real covenant relationship with the living God.

What is lacking in the book by either interpretation, of course, are many of the great themes of Scripture with their assurances of God’s own faithfulness toward those who trust in him. But this is perhaps to ask too much of this expression of speculative wisdom, which is not so much trying to provide

answers as it is to remind its readers of the hard questions — ones that ultimately point us to Christ’s death and resurrection for the answer.

WISDOM IN SONG OF SONGS

Song of Songs is a lengthy love song, a ballad about human romance, written in the style of ancient Near Eastern lyric poetry. We may call it lyric wisdom. Love songs as such have had a long history, including in Israel (see Ezek 33:32). But how does a love song fit the category of wisdom, and why is such love poetry in the Bible at all? The answer is actually quite simple: First, it was associated with Solomon (1:1; 3:6 – 11; 8:11 – 12; on this issue see *How to 2*, p. 162), whose name in Israel was synonymous with wisdom. But at a deeper level it deals explicitly with a category of wisdom found in Proverbs: the “wise choice” of marital and sexual fidelity.

God has created human beings with a large number of brain cells devoted to love and sex. This is a fact of our humanity and a part of God’s design that was declared “good” (Gen 1:31). Unfortunately, as with everything else, the fall also corrupted this dimension of our humanity. Instead of its being a constant source of joy and blessing in monogamous marriage, as God intended, sexual love is often a means of selfish personal gratification involving all sorts of lusts and exploitation. But these things need not be. True romance can be celebrated to God’s glory in keeping with his original design; and this is what Song of Songs is about.

To be sure, the book has had a long history of odd interpretation in the form of allegorizing. Because readers were uncomfortable with its forthright, explicit exultation of human

sexual love, many early interpreters — both Jewish and Christian — looked for a way around it. They found it in the allegorical “love songs” in the Prophetic Books — one way the prophets told the story of God’s love for his people, Israel, and how that love was rejected or abused (e.g., Isa 5:1 – 7; Hos 2:2 – 15). Since some of the same kind of language and imagery used by the prophets in these songs is also used throughout Song of Songs, they concluded that the book was also an allegory. In an age when it was a common practice to allegorize virtually all of Scripture (see p. 108), some early church fathers argued that the Song of Songs should be read as an allegory of Christ’s love for the church. Indeed, an early church council (AD 550) forbade any other interpretation, so that it has prevailed until recent times.

But even on the surface that is obviously *not* what the Song of Songs is about. Rather, it centers on human love — love between a man and a woman, celebrating both this love itself and their attraction for one another. After all, nothing in the Prophetic Books reads like this(!):

How beautiful you are, my darling!

Oh, how beautiful!

Your eyes behind your veil are doves.

Your hair is like a flock of goats

descending from the hills of Gilead.

Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just
shorn,

coming up from the washing.
Each has its twin;
not one of them is alone.
Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;
your mouth is lovely.
Your temples behind your veil
are like the halves of a pomegranate.
Your neck is like the tower of David,
built with courses of stone;
on it hang a thousand shields,
all of them shields of warriors.

Song of Songs 4:1 – 4

This is the language of a man's adoration of his loved one in which he compares features of her appearance to beautiful images in life. He is not talking, of course, about things that are strictly similar in appearance but things that are similarly impressive visually. And so it goes throughout the book. Nothing in the prophetic love songs compares with Song of Songs 5:2 – 6, where the woman recounts a dream in which she was asleep and could not wake up and move fast enough to keep from missing the man she loved when he called for her ("I slept but my heart was awake" is a poetic way of saying "I was dreaming"). Here the dream serves to heighten the emphasis on the attraction she feels for the man she loves and how

frustrating it is when she misses a chance to be with him (cf. also 3:1 – 5).

There are many other kinds of expressions of love and fondness in the Song of Songs in addition to visual comparisons and dream sequences: statements of the ardor of love (e.g., 1:2 – 4), advice and challenge from observers of the romance (e.g., 1:8; 5:9), romantic invitations from the man to the woman and vice versa (e.g., 7:11 – 13; 8:13), purposely exaggerated boasts about the greatness of the woman by the man and vice versa (e.g., 2:8 – 9), the need to resist temptation to be unfaithfully attracted to anyone else (e.g., 6:8 – 9), and declaration that a lover's attraction can be stronger even than the splendor of so great a king as Solomon himself (e.g., 3:6 – 11 following on 2:16 – 3:5; cf. 8:11 – 12). All these are cast in the form of musical poetry, celebrating human love in a monogamous relationship as God's good gift.

Here, then, are some of the considerations we think will help you use the Song of Songs in the way Scripture intends (see further, *How to 2*, pp. 161 – 65):

First, try to appreciate the overall ethical context of Song of Songs. Monogamous, heterosexual marriage was the proper context for sexual activity according to God's revelation in the Old Testament, and God-fearing Israelites would regard the book in that light. The attitude of the book itself is the very antithesis of unfaithfulness, either before or after marriage. Marriage consummates and continues love between a man and a woman. This is what the Song of Songs points toward.

Second, be aware of the genre of the Song of Songs. Its closest parallels are indeed the love poetry of the Old Testament and elsewhere in the ancient Near East, the context

of which was not just love of any kind but attraction in marriage. Love songs were probably sung routinely at wedding banquets and had great meaning for those involved. They speak of attraction, fidelity, warding off the temptation to cheat, the preciousness of love, its joys and pleasures, and the dangers of infidelity.

Third, read the Song of Songs as *suggesting* godly choices rather than merely *describing* these choices in a mundane manner. This is similar to what we have already said about interpreting proverbs — they carry truth as suggestions and generalizations rather than precise statements of universal fact. In Scripture some parallels to the Song of Songs can be found in the prologue to Proverbs (chs. 1 – 9). There one finds poems about the attractiveness of wisdom and the counter-attractiveness of folly, in a manner that suggests lyrically rather than propositionally what our right choices ought to be.

Fourth, be aware that the Song of Songs focuses on very different values from those of our modern culture. Today “experts” talk about sex *techniques* but almost never about virtuous *romance*, the attraction of a man and a woman to each other that leads to and continues in lifelong marriage. Some “experts” advocate self-indulgence; the Song of Songs emphasizes just the opposite. Our culture encourages people to fulfill themselves, whatever their sexual tastes and desires, whereas the Song of Songs is concerned with how one person can respond faithfully to the attractiveness of another and fulfill the needs of the other. In most of the modern world, romance is thought of as something that precedes marriage, and is based primarily on feelings or pleasure. In the Song of Songs, romance is something that actually characterizes marriage, even forty-three years later, as in the case of one of

the authors, and sixty years later, as in the case of the other. Let it be so.