

Proverbs

With the book of Proverbs, we will begin three weeks in a particular kind of literature from the Hebrew Scriptures known as wisdom literature. There are some assumptions out of which wisdom literature works that flow through the three book-length parts of the scriptures – Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. These assumptions include:

- Following out of Genesis 1, the basic assumption is that God created the universe and that this universe has an order to it. In Genesis 1, we see that order in the six days of creation, bringing order out of chaos, and the structure of the universe. The wisdom assumes this order of creation and that the order can be discerned through observation. Thus, wisdom arises not so much from a direct revelation from God (unlike the prophets who say, “Thus says the Lord...”), but from paying attention to how creation works, noticing the patterns of the world around, and what works that makes life smoother.
- In searching for this order placed into creation by God, wisdom literature focuses on passing on wisdom from one generation to the next. There is an “accumulated” wisdom that comes from generations paying attention to the world and putting it together for coming generations. Thus, wisdom literature values experiential learning and is an accumulation of human experiences over the ages.
- The “advice” of wisdom literature is that if we tune into the order that God has placed in the universe life goes better. When we are out of tune, life does not go as well. Many of us can remember black and white televisions with knob tuning. As you got closer to the channel, the snow on the screen begin to become discernible shapes and when you were tuned directly in, there was a clear picture. Wisdom literature assumes this type of tuning – the more we are tuned into God’s ways discerned from the order set in the world, the sharper life will be. As we are out of tune, the fuzzier life will be.
- Wisdom literature is shared through the whole of the ancient Near Eastern (ANE) world. It is not unique to Israel, as we find wisdom literature in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. This ANE tradition is shared across cultures and geography, which makes some sense as they are all trying to discern through observation what order God (or for everyone else the gods) has put into creation. Thus, we find very similar parallels in other ANE literature to the three books that we have in the Bible.
- In all the ANE literature there seems to be a progression not so dissimilar to what we discussed with Walter Brueggemann and the Psalms. This progression is a move from orientation to disorientation to reorientation, and in the Bible can be seen as we journey from Proverbs to Job to Ecclesiastes.

With those assumptions in mind, we come to the book of Proverbs. In its simplest sense, Proverbs seeks to orient our lives to the wisdom that comes from God. Presented as the teaching of a parent to a child, Proverbs offers instruction from one generation on how to live

well to the next generation. At the beginning of the book, wisdom and its opposite, folly, are portrayed as two different women (Proverbs was written in a patriarchal culture and assumed fathers passing on this wisdom to sons). Dame Folly is presented as a seducer away from the way of the upright, while Dame Wisdom offers the way to life, health and hope. Proverbs is an invitation to follow Wisdom and not be enticed away into Folly and a promise if one follows wisdom that life goes better than if one does not (recall Psalm 1 which contrasted a well-watered tree and chaff).

After the first eight chapters that highlight the difference between these two choices, the book of Proverbs lives up to its name's sake with a collection of proverbs from a variety of sources, that are to provide instruction in the way of wisdom. Traditionally assigned to Solomon, the book itself suggests that these proverbs come from all manners of life, hundreds of years of experience and even other sources such as Agur, son of Jakeh. Imagine gathering all our grandparents together and simply asking them, "What works in life and what does not?" Their "wisdom" would come in a variety of sayings ("A stitch in time"), that we would collect into a book and keep it to pass onto our children and so on and so on. This is the collection of proverbs that we have, a collection of generations of wisdom collected together and written down. Intriguingly these proverbs do not always agree, and often seem to give opposite advice. Thus, wisdom is not as simple as simply knowing the proverb but understanding when the proverb is applicable.

Reflection Questions:

1. What wisdom have you learned or has been passed down to you from previous generations? What wisdom do you believe is important to pass on to younger generations?
2. Is there a difference between human wisdom and God's wisdom? If so, how would you characterize the differences? the similarities?
3. Choose a proverb from the book of Proverbs. Does your life experience bear witness to this wisdom or does your experience produce different wisdom? Does the wisdom from Proverbs sound like any wisdom that was passed down to you or that you have sought to pass down to others?
