

## “Acquire Wisdom”

### Reading Proverbs and Ecclesiastes

*Primary Reading: Proverbs 1, 3, 6, 7, 10, 22, 23, 30, 31; Ecclesiastes 1–3, 7–8, 10, 12.*

### Outside the Bible’s Theological Triangle

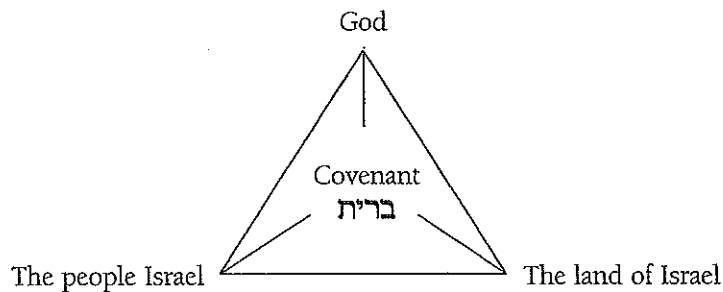
Even a cursory glance at the books of Proverbs and of Ecclesiastes suggests that they are unlike anything we have encountered so far. They are not instruction in the same way that Torah is—Proverbs, for example, is largely composed of pithy sayings that are not marked as having divine origin. Nor are they Israelite historical texts—while Proverbs and Ecclesiastes do mention King Solomon, they record little in the way of actual events. Nor are the two books prophetic—the profound sentiments of Ecclesiastes, for example, are words of that preacher; they are not understood to be divine. The messenger formula “thus said the LORD” is lacking in both books.

The same is true of a third biblical book, Job, which is the focus of the next chapter yet treated in this chapter insofar as it is similar to Proverbs and to Ecclesiastes. God communicates directly with a human being only at the very end, and even there provides no real guidance on how to live. The story of Job is set in the land of Uz—not in Israel, and it does not involve Israelites. The book shows no interest in the Israelite past. It bears no prophetic message.

These three books share certain other features, too. They all contain a preponderance of aphorisms and proverbs.<sup>1</sup> Together they account for most of the Bible’s usages of the abstract noun *chokhmah* (חִכְמָה, “wisdom”; 88 out of a total of 161) and of verbs formed from the root *ch-kh-m*, (חָכַם, “to be wise”; 96 out of 166). This, combined with other factors, suggests to many that the three books emanate from a wisdom school—although exactly what that school was still eludes us.<sup>2</sup> They also all engage in exploring the proper cosmic order.<sup>3</sup>

A certain lack binds these books strongly together: they all lack expressions of concern for the covenant that unites Israel and God. In fact, concern with Israel *as a nation* is absent—as noted, Job does not even mention Israel. Furthermore, these books concern themselves more with the individual than with “corporate Israel.”

Stated differently, these three books lie outside of the Bible’s theological triangle. That is, most of the Bible is interested in the relationships between God, the people Israel, and the land of Israel. I can portray those three concerns as the corners of a triangle (see diagram). At the center of the triangle lies the covenant, because its goal is to unite the three entities: if the people of Israel uphold the covenant of the God of Israel, they will possess the land of Israel.



This thesis is a main theme of the Torah, which evokes it often in its land promises, and in the great rebukes in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Meanwhile, the historical books of Nevi'im narrate the connection between Israel's observance of the law and its land tenure. The prophetic books offer warnings to Israel, telling them how to remain on the land—or how to repossess it.

Such a cluster of themes is absent in the three books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. Furthermore, in places, their perspective on “covenantal” concerns is at odds with the other biblical books. For example, both Torah and prophetic texts emphasize the importance of supporting the poor, as may be seen when Deuteronomy discusses the remission of debts every seventh year:

(15:9) Beware lest you harbor the base thought, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching,” so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give him nothing. He will cry out to the LORD against you, and you will incur guilt. (10) Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the LORD your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. (11) For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.

Likewise, Amos, a prophetic text, shows a strong concern for the poor:

(2:6) Thus said the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, / For four, I will not revoke it: / Because they have sold for silver / Those whose cause was just, / And the needy for a pair of sandals. / (7) Ah, you who trample the heads of the poor / Into the dust of the ground . . .

In contrast, Proverbs chides one who has bothered to help out a poor person by cosigning a loan:

(6:1) My son, if you have stood surety for your fellow, / Given your hand for another, / (2) You have been trapped by the words of your mouth, / Snared by the words of your mouth. / (3) Do this, then, my son, to extricate yourself, / For you have come into the power of your fellow: / Go grovel—and badger your fellow; / (4) Give your eyes no sleep, / Your pupils no slumber. / (5) Save yourself like a deer out of the hand of a hunter, / Like a bird out of the hand of a fowler.

It is hard to believe that Proverbs—with its practical yet less compassionate attitude toward the poor—appears in the same Bible as Deuteronomy and Amos!

Even in cases where all biblical books agree that something is bad or good, Proverbs presents the issue in a distinctive manner. For example, the entire Bible is anti-adultery. (The Bible defines adultery as a man's having sexual intercourse with a woman who is married to another man.) In the Torah, adultery is a capital offense: “If a man is found lying with another man's wife, both of them . . . shall die. Thus you will sweep away evil from Israel” (Deut. 22:22). In the Torah's narrative, Joseph recognizes the seriousness of adultery when he says to Mrs. Potiphár: “How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?” (Gen. 39:9). In contrast, Proverbs condemns adultery as an offense not against God but rather against the woman's husband:

(6:32) He who commits adultery is devoid of sense; / Only one who would destroy himself does such a thing. / (33) He will meet with disease and disgrace; / His reproach will never be expunged. / (34) The fury of the husband will be passionate; / He will show no pity on his day of vengeance. / (35) He will not have regard for any ransom; / He will refuse your bribe, however great.

In this respect, Proverbs' view of adultery is like that in the rest of the Near Eastern world.

Indeed, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job are more international in their purview than other books in the Bible. This is most obvious in the sections of

Proverbs that echo an earlier Egyptian text called *The Instruction of Amenemope*, as we shall see below. But all three books show many more similarities—in style and in specific phrases and lines—to pre-Israelite literature. Apparently the authors of these biblical books had access to this non-Israelite material—and saw fit to make use of it.

Given the similarities among these three books, and their differences from the rest of the Bible, scholars customarily refer to them together as “Wisdom Literature.”<sup>4</sup> Not all scholars agree that this is the best term.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, many scholars believe that the scope of this literature extends beyond these three books.<sup>6</sup> Yet in the same way that Leviticus and Deuteronomy may be studied together usefully as Torah, or that Isaiah and Ezekiel may be studied together effectively as classical prophecy, the three books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job can be examined productively with regard to each other. Also, given their international flavor, it is often helpful to read them against other ancient Near Eastern texts, rather than in light of the Torah or Israelite prophetic texts.

## What Is Proverbs?

Proverbs is a collection of smaller collections of diverse proverbs and other didactic material from diverse settings, some of which reflect international influence. As our discussion will show, the attribution to King Solomon in 1:1 is not historically accurate. Many of its adages address the pursuit of wisdom or righteousness.

### Patterns That Reveal the Book's Nature

The same types of evidence that led us to conclude that Psalms is a collection of collections (see chapter 22) apply to Proverbs as well. Partway through this book, a notice reads: “These too are proverbs of Solomon, which the men of King Hezekiah of Judah copied” (25:1), indicating that Proverbs once concluded just before that point. In addition, the book repeats many of its proverbs. For example, both Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25 read: “A road may seem right to a man, / But in the end it is a road to death.”<sup>7</sup> Other proverbs are told in nearly identical forms, for example: “Ill-gotten wealth is of no avail, / But righteousness saves from death” (10:2) and “Wealth is of no avail on the day of wrath, / But

righteousness saves from death” (11:4).<sup>8</sup> Both phenomena suggest that a proverb (sometimes altered during transmission) found its way into more than one collection, which a later editor compiled into the larger book.

Occasionally, two separate verses share only half of a proverb while their respective other halves each reflect a distinct viewpoint. For example, the following verses give two different answers to the question of how to live long and well:

The instruction of a wise man is a fountain of life, / Enabling one to avoid deadly snares. (13:14)

Fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, / Enabling one to avoid deadly snares. (14:27)

The difference in perspective is significant. The first proverb is secular—it advocates following the words of a wise sage, who is not necessarily righteous in terms of following divine law. To recast its message in modern terms: go gain the type of practical wisdom taught in secular schools, for those skills will keep you out of trouble. In contrast, the second proverb is religious. In modern terms, it recommends going to synagogue or church.

To give another example, the following pair offers the same contrast in perspective:

The horse is readied for the day of battle, / But victory comes from the LORD (21:31).

For by stratagems you wage war, / And victory comes with much planning (24:6).

The first proverb holds that God causes all (“theonomy”), whereas the second one suggests that humans control their own fate (“autonomy”).

Thus, proverbs in Proverbs seem to have two very different perspectives: God is either the major player or else ignored altogether. The first type emphasizes “fear of God,” “righteousness,” and “wickedness,” while the second type highlights “wisdom,” “being wise,” and “being foolish.” Words that characterize one type rarely appear together with words that typify the other type.<sup>9</sup> Some scholars believe that these two types reflect different worldviews:<sup>10</sup> in one, God micromanages; in the other, things just happen.<sup>11</sup> Alternately, the same person may have upheld each of these views at different times. But at any rate, each proverb presents only one point of view.

### The Central Section

The bulk of Proverbs (10:1–22:16) is comprised of two-part sayings in which the second part opposes the first part (a poetic form called “antithetical parallelism”; see chapter 17). These sayings seem to have no connection one to the next. Here is a typical three-verse-long passage from this section of the book:

- (10:4) Negligent hands cause poverty, / But diligent hands enrich.  
 (5) He who lays in stores during the summer is a capable son, / But he who sleeps during the harvest is an incompetent.  
 (6) Blessings light upon the head of the righteous, / But lawlessness covers the mouth of the wicked.

For some reason, the editors of Proverbs prefer sayings of this type, which is often redundant. Such a preference is odd; surely the ancient Israelites did not compose all their proverbs in this form. Indeed, most popular proverbs quoted elsewhere in the Bible and the ancient Near East appear in a wide range of other forms, such as “How can straw be compared to grain?” (Jer. 23:28), or “Let not him who girds on his sword boast like him who ungirds it!” (1 Kings 20:11).<sup>12</sup>

### The First Section

Very different from the book’s center section is its opening (chaps. 1–9). It contains none of those independent, pithy, two-part sayings. Instead, this section presents a paean to wisdom as an ideal. It develops this theme through several speeches addressed to a young adult male, which contrast two women: an archetypal (yet real) woman, depicted as a foreign<sup>13</sup> seductress; and *chokhmah* (חַכְמָה, “wisdom”), personified as female in vivid terms.<sup>14</sup> In addition to glorifying wisdom, this section drives home the point that the real woman—the smooth-talking temptress—is deadly: “a highway to Sheol / Leading down to Death’s inner chambers” (7:27). Obviously this section is xenophobic and misogynistic; we do not know why such opinions figure so prominently in Proverbs’ introduction.<sup>15</sup>

### The Third Section

The book’s third section is also quite distinct from the first two sections described above. It begins with a new introduction of its own (22:17–21). Then

it presents a number of sayings that are several verses long; for example: “When you sit down to dine with a ruler, / Consider well who is before you. / Thrust a knife into your gullet / If you have a large appetite. / Do not crave for his dainties, / For they are counterfeit food” (23:1–3). Following that subsection is the superscription mentioned earlier, which introduces another subsection with more of the same: “These too are proverbs of Solomon, which the men of King Hezekiah of Judah copied” (25:1).

The main portion of this section (22:17–24:34) is where we find many similarities—as mentioned above—to an Egyptian work, *The Instruction of Amenemope*.<sup>16</sup> The similarities include the following pairings:

Do not rob the wretched because he is wretched; / Do not crush the poor man in the gate. (Proverbs 22:22)  
 Beware of robbing a wretch, / Of attacking a cripple. (Amenemope 2)

Do not remove the ancient boundary stone / That your ancestors set up. (Proverbs 22:28)

Do not remove ancient boundary stones; / Do not encroach upon the field of orphans, / For they have a mighty Kinsman, / And He will surely take up their cause with you. (Proverbs 23:10–11)

Do not move the markers on the borders of fields, / Nor shift the position of the measuring-cord. / Do not be greedy for a cubit of land, / Nor encroach on the boundaries of a widow. (Amenemope 6)

The two books share too much wording to be independent works. But which borrowed from which? Consider that one verse in Proverbs makes sense only when we assume that its editor borrowed material from some form of *Amenemope*. That verse reads: “Indeed, I wrote down for you a threefold lore” (22:20). This is obscure—there is nothing “threefold” in the context. We can resolve the problem if we assume that the vowels of one word became corrupted in transmission. (The Masoretic tradition already acts as if one of the letters suffered from a scribal error at some point.) If instead of the Masoretic reading of the consonants שְׁלִישִׁים as *shalishim* (“threefold”) we read *sheloshim* (“thirty”), we can understand this verse as a reference to the thirty sections of *Amenemope*.

We cannot know exactly how and when an Israelite editor employed a version of that earlier work, in part because the history of composition of Proverbs is complex (as the structure discussed so far indicates). Yet it appears that an editor of Proverbs changed the name of the deity mentioned in the Egyptian book, while leaving much of the rest alone.

## The Final Section

The continuation of Proverbs contains a variety of material. Some of it resembles what we have seen earlier. Other passages are quite different. This includes a collection of numerical sayings, such as: “The earth shudders at three things, / At four which it cannot bear: / A slave who becomes king; / A scoundrel sated with food; / A loathsome woman who gets married; / A slave-girl who supplants her mistress” (30:21–23). Also unique is the acrostic paean to the “capable wife” (31:10–31), which concludes the book. In other words, passages on the topic of women frame the Book of Proverbs at its beginning and end.<sup>17</sup>

## Reading Proverbs

Each section of Proverbs presents particular challenges. The first nine chapters, with their caricature of a “foreign woman,” is by today’s egalitarian standards offensive. In the second, central section, many proverbs are too obvious to excite, such as: “A wise son brings joy to his father; / A dull son is his mother’s sorrow” (10:1). They prompt unanswerable questions, such as: For whom were these words intended? Were they meant for educating children?<sup>18</sup> Other sayings, however, are colorful and surprising; like the best of modern proverbs, they provoke the reader to think about the associations that they make. For example: “A gold ring in the snout of a pig. / A beautiful woman bereft of sense” (11:22; transl. adapted).<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the most challenging part of reading Proverbs is taking it on its own terms, removed from other biblical literature. Most interpreters have failed to do so. Thus, Yeshua (Joshua) Ben-Sirach, a sage living in the second century B.C.E., identified “wisdom” with “fear of the LORD,” conflating what in Proverbs had been two distinct ideas (see above, “Patterns That Reveal the Book’s Nature”). For example, Ben-Sirach opens his book with the observation that “all wisdom is from the LORD,” and elsewhere it notes that “the whole of wisdom is fear of the Lord” (19:20).<sup>20</sup> This identification of wisdom and righteousness became standard in later Judaism—so much so that later generations took the word “wisdom” in Proverbs to mean “Torah.” Thus Jewish tradition has long understood Torah, and not simply wisdom, to be the subject of the famous verse, “She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, / And whoever holds on to her is happy” (Prov. 3:18; compare v. 13). Historical-critical study encourages us to strip away such later identifications, and to understand such texts on their own terms—that is, in reference to secular wisdom.

## Ecclesiastes: Utter Futility!

Ecclesiastes, also known by its Hebrew title *Kohelet* (or Koheleth, Qohelet, or Qoheleth), is one of the Bible’s most challenging books. Part of the problem derives from our lack of a clear understanding the history of its composition. Most scholars suggest that the book ends with a secondary set of appendices in 12:9–14, which attempt to make a rather radical book more acceptable.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, if we set aside these verses to look at the “original” work, we see a book that is neatly bracketed by an inclusio: 1:2 reads “Utter futility!—said Koheleth—Utter futility! All is futile!”; 12:8 seconds that view by nearly repeating it, “Utter futility—said Koheleth—All is futile!”

But even apart from the dramatic shift of direction in the last six verses, the book is very difficult. It contains a large number of genres, including monologue (chaps. 1–2), poetry (chaps. 3, 12), and proverbial sayings (chaps. 7, 10). How these compositions combine to create meaning is often not clear. Further, the protagonist quotes not only proverbs that he agrees with, but also popular proverbs that he wishes to show are wrong,<sup>22</sup> yet often we cannot tell which are which.

Despite the barriers that we face, we do hold several keys to reading Ecclesiastes.<sup>23</sup> First, we know based on its vocabulary and style that it is a wisdom book, and as such it is full of observations. The protagonist, Koheleth (whom the book seems to identify with King Solomon;<sup>24</sup> 1:1, 12, 16), is constantly finding, looking, and observing. Indeed, the word *ra’iti* (רָאִיתִי), “I saw, I found, I observed”) appears eighteen times in this short book. As in Proverbs, students learn not through Torah study, nor through prophetic oracles, but through observation.

Ecclesiastes, however, differs from Proverbs in one remarkable facet: Proverbs treats wisdom as positive, whereas Ecclesiastes—having experimented with both wisdom and foolishness—finds that wisdom too has limitations:

(2:15) “The fate of the fool is also destined for me; to what advantage, then, have I been wise?” And I came to the conclusion that that too was futile, (16) because the wise man, just like the fool, is not remembered forever; for, as the succeeding days roll by, both are forgotten. Alas, the wise man dies, just like the fool!

In other words, wisdom is fleeting, because the wise man does not get credit for his perspicacity; thus, later generations do not remember him. An anecdote in 9:13–15 confirms this view: a poor wise man who saves a city is forgotten. Koheleth then concludes, using the form of point and counterpoint: “So I

observed: Wisdom is better than valor; but: A poor man's wisdom is scorned, / And his words are not heeded" (v. 16).

A second key to the book is that it assumes a vast gap between God and people: God controls everything in the world, but people cannot understand how He does this. As a result of that chasm, it views people's vaunted wisdom as actually worthless. Koheleth states this quite clearly: "and I have observed all that God brings to pass. Indeed, man cannot guess the events that occur under the sun. For man tries strenuously, but fails to guess them; and even if a sage should think to discover them he would not be able to guess them" (8:17). Thus a major theme of the book is God's control of the world—a domination that is both complete and inscrutable. Indeed, this is the point of the book's famous poem:

(3:1) A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven: / (2) A time for being born and a time for dying, / A time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted. . . / (8) A time for loving and a time for hating; / A time for war and a time for peace.

The point is that God has determined what these "seasons" should be; nothing that humans do can change them.<sup>25</sup> People are powerless to change what God has determined. Moreover, they cannot even know when those seasons occur. As the same passage puts it: "I have observed the business that God gave man to be concerned with: He brings everything to pass precisely at its time; He also puts eternity [= the desire to know the future] in their mind, but without man ever guessing, from first to last, all the things that God brings to pass" (vv. 10–11). Such extreme determinism distinguishes Ecclesiastes from the rest of the Bible.<sup>26</sup>

One might think that people's reaction to a world in which they are pawns, in which God "holds all the cards," would cause suicidal pessimism. However, this same passage tells us that "the only worthwhile thing there is for them is to enjoy themselves and do what is good in their lifetime; also, . . . whenever a man does eat and drink and get enjoyment out of all his wealth, it is a gift of God" (vv. 12–13). Irony of ironies: try to be happy, but it is God who will decide if you will be happy or not.

This leads us to the book's third key: happiness is one of its major themes.<sup>27</sup> Koheleth concludes that "the only good a man can have under the sun is to eat and drink and enjoy himself. That much can accompany him . . . through the days of life that God has granted him under the sun" (8:15). Elsewhere the Bible has no problems with happiness. What makes Ecclesiastes exceptional is its giving a central role to happiness, "the gift of God" (3:13; 5:18).

## More Wisdom

The theme of wisdom will continue in the next chapter, as we explore Job. Like Proverbs and Koheleth, Job emphasizes the importance of experience in understanding how the world functions. Yet the experience of the author of Job seems to have differed remarkably from that of the authors of the other two works, yielding a much more enigmatic and profound work.