

Wisdom Literature: An Introduction

The Nature of Wisdom

- OT books commonly classified as “Wisdom Literature”
 - Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes
 - Several Psalms
 - Song of Songs contains wisdom, though is not entirely a book about gaining wisdom
- Wisdom: “The ability to make godly choices in life”
 - This is achieved by applying God’s truth to every aspect of life, so that one’s choices will indeed be godly
- As straightforward as this seems, Christians often misunderstand and misapply OT wisdom literature

Abuses 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 they have an overall message
 - Portions of wisdom literature, like all Scripture, when taken out of context, can sound profound and practical, but lead to misapplication
 - Ex.) “For as he thinketh in his heart, so *is* he.” (Pro. 23:7, KJV)
 - Often used by ‘name it and claim it’ proponents, with the idea that as you think, you can make something come into existence
 - What it means in context is a reference to someone who is inwardly deceitful (see ESV)
 2. People sometimes misunderstand the terms and categories of Hebrew wisdom, as well as its styles and literary modes
 - Ex.) “Leave the presence of a fool, for there you do not meet words of knowledge.” (Pro. 14:7)
 - Does this mean that Christians should not associate with someone who may have a mental disability, or is uneducated, or mentally ill?
 - That is a misunderstanding of the term ‘fool’
 - In Hebrew wisdom, a ‘fool’ is someone who does not acknowledge the true God, and thus live according to selfish, indulgent whims (Ps. 14:1; 53:1)
 - The command is not to shun ‘fools’, but rather, not to seek them as a source of wisdom
 3. People often fail to understand what a book is all about, and thus also fail to follow the line of argument
 - This is especially true in Job

- Thus, people will quote as biblical truth what was intended to be an incorrect understanding of life
- Ex.) "The wicked man writhes in pain all his days, through all the years that are laid up for the ruthless." (Job 15:20)
 - This seems to teach that evil people cannot ever be happy
 - However, this observation is from Job's 'comforter' Eliphaz, who is claiming to Job is suffering due to some sin on Job's part
 - Something Job refutes
 - Later in Job, God vindicates Job and condemns the words of Eliphaz (see Job 42:7-8)
- One must read the whole discourse to understand the context of who is speaking and whether it has merit or not