Wisdom Literature Series

Lesson 1: Introduction to Wisdom Literature, Proverbs 1:1-7

Objective: To learn more about Wisdom Literature and introduce the book of Proverbs. We will discuss the meaning of wisdom and the purpose of Proverbs. We will begin looking at Proverbs by studying Proverbs 1:1-7.

Opening questions:
When you were growing up, who would you turn to for advice?
Who do you turn to now? Why do you choose that person/people?

We often turn to people who have experience to ask them for advice. If we have questions about our jobs, we may turn to people who know something about what we do. If we need advice on parenting, we turn to those who have had experience in parenting. If we are looking for advice on our spiritual lives, we tend to turn to people who have active lives of following God – sometimes it is a paid minister or an elder, or it is someone we know who has experienced living life with God through good times and hard times. Experience matters.

When we read the Bible, we see that the Israelites looked to three different groups of people for instruction in how to follow God. Notice who is named in these scriptures:

Jeremiah 18:18: Then they said, “Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah— for instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the
word from the prophet. Come, let us bring charges against him, and let us not heed any of his words.”

Ezekiel 7:26,
“Disaster comes upon disaster,
rumor follows rumor;
they shall keep seeking a vision from the prophet;
instruction shall perish from the priest,
and counsel from the elders.”

Matthew 23:34-35, “Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town”

Glenn Pemberton points out in his book *A Life That is Good* that the Israelites had three different groups of people who taught them about God and how to live life with God – the priests, the prophets, and the sages (also called elders or the wise).\(^1\) The priests were chosen by God as part of the lineage of Aaron, they studied the *Torah* (the Law of Moses, Genesis – Deuteronomy) and primarily looked to it to know God and who He wanted them to be; they were mainly concerned with worship, holiness, and teaching the people the *Torah* and obedience to it.\(^2\) The prophets were called by God, but they could be a part of any tribe. They also pointed the way to God and were concerned about obedience to God – their emphasis was often on the need for people to place no gods before God and to obey God by actively loving others - especially those


\(^2\) Pemberton, 5-6.
who were vulnerable such as orphans and widows. They had a unique ability of seeing through words and actions that seemed pious but were not – when the people thought they were following God by obeying certain rules, the prophets were able to pull back the curtain and reveal what was wrong. The prophets could almost be described as God’s attorneys, arguing his case; but rather than looking to the Torah for direction, they claimed to receive messages directly from God – they would say things like, “Thus says the Lord,...”. Ancient Israelites learned who God was and how to obey him from these two groups of people.

This is not a surprise to us - we are used to reading about the priests and the prophets, but we may not have the thought much about the third group. The Israelites also looked to sages to help them learn how to live life with God. While the prophets and priests often spoke about God, God’s history with Israel, and God’s intent for his people, the sages rarely spoke about God’s commands or history with Israel; instead, they focused on how to live daily life under God – they focused on common everyday issues like friendship, living in a family, working, money, and speech. They did not claim to hear God’s voice as the prophets did, but they based much of what they taught from what they saw and experienced.

The book of Ecclesiastes gives us some insight into how sages got their information:

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3 Pemberton, 6-7.
4 Pemberton, 7-8.
5 Pemberton, 9.
6 Pemberton, 8-9.
3:16: “Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well.”

4:1a: “Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them!”

4:4a: “Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person’s envy of another.”

You can also look at 4:7-8, 5:8, 5:13, 5:18, and 6:1 to see similar references to the sage and what he has seen.

What observations have you made about life that you pass on to others?

Parents are likely to easily think of observations about things that they pass on to their children or to other parents. One example: I always tell my kids that when you start school, do your very best at the beginning of the semester to show the teacher that you work hard and study – if you give good answers and illustrate you know the subject, then as time goes on, they are more likely to give you the benefit of a doubt. This is based on my experience both as a student and a teacher. But, you do not have to be a parent to pass on wisdom! When Karl and I worked in campus ministry, I often passed on dating and relationship advice to young women based on my own experiences and observations up to that point.

Who do you think would be similar to the priests and prophets in today’s world?

Who might be similar to sages in today’s world?

What value is there in hearing from all three different voices – reading from the three traditions in scripture and listening to the equivalent today?
Glenn Pemberton compares the priests, prophets and sages speaking for and about God to a choir with tenors, altos and sopranos – each voice is different and each voice is needed. We know that God is complex and mysterious and not easily understood. Hearing from different voices about God, even when they occasionally might sound like they disagree with each other, reminds us of the complexity and mystery of God. If we only listen to one voice, and we think we know exactly who God is, we might be in danger of following a God of our own making.

The sages were known for teaching wisdom. The Israelite sages paid attention to how the world worked, and they looked to God and what they knew of God to base their wisdom on him. They used all of this knowledge and insight and experience to teach others how to live. As we will see in Proverbs, they fully recognized that all wisdom comes from God. Wisdom literature does not talk about the covenant or God’s history with the Israelites. Instead, it was meant to teach the people of their time how to live in a world that is created and centered on God. Roland E. Murphy writes, “Wisdom does not re-present the actions of God in Israel’s history; it deals with daily human experience in the good world created by God.”

The three books in our Old Testament that are considered “Wisdom Literature” by almost all scholars are Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes; some also consider Song of Songs to be wisdom literature. Wisdom writings are also in other parts of Scripture. There are Psalms that are considered “wisdom psalms,” and in the New Testament, we see wisdom writings in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew

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7 Pemberton, 20.

5-7) and in the book of James. In our study on Wisdom Literature that will go through May 30, we will focus on Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. Proverbs is considered the “baseline” for all wisdom literature, so we will start with Proverbs and spend the majority of our time there.\(^9\)

In Proverbs, we find practical instructions on how to live in the everyday world in a way that honors God and others. The older train the younger, trying to form their character, showing what real life is like and how to cope with it.\(^10\) This practicality includes the clear teaching of consequences – as we make choices to live in certain ways, consequences follow whether good or bad. We take responsibility for our own lives as we live in the freedom God gave us to know and serve him.\(^11\) This teaching clearly goes along with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as well as the rest of the history of the Israelites. We have free will and get to choose to obey, and the choices we make matter. Although we often teach our children that there are consequences for behavior, we live in a world that rarely wants to admit that there are consequences for adult behavior – yet we all experience the consequences. In Proverbs, we see the sages point out that there are always consequences for our actions.

How would you define wisdom?

Merriam-Webster defines wisdom this way:

Ability to discern inner qualities and relationship: Insight
Good sense: Judgment


\(^10\) Murphy, 15.

Generally Accepted belief
Accumulated philosophical or scientific learning: Knowledge

The Hebrew word for wisdom is *hokmah*, and it is used in the Old Testament in multiple ways. The first level of meaning of *hokmah* is that of an ability, gift or skill - it is used in this way to describe the mourning women in Jeremiah 9:17-18, the skilled men who pilot a ship in Ezekiel 27:8, and Bezalel and Oholiab and others who made the tabernacle in Exodus 31:2-4. Mark Sneed describes different kinds of wisdom in the ancient Hebrew world including professional or technical wisdom, art of divination (Daniel), royal wisdom, and political wisdom. These would all go along with the first level of meaning for *hokmah*. There is a second level of meaning to *hokmah* which we see in Proverbs and other places in the Old Testament. In Proverbs, wisdom is described as a gift from God, given to those who ask and seek it, leading to a life that is integrated and lived with expertise. We see this meaning conveyed in the life of King Solomon as described in I Kings 3-10 – he asks for wisdom and receives it from God. He is known as being so wise that the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are all attributed to him.

As we read wisdom literature, we will see that wisdom is often paired with “knowledge,” “understanding,” “instructions,” and “advice.” We can’t be wise without knowing, understanding, and receiving instruction and advice. But

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12 Pemberton, 10.
14 Pemberton, 10-11.
15 Sneed, 16.
wisdom doesn’t stop there, it includes acting on what we have learned – it is a lifestyle.\(^\text{16}\)

How is this definition the same or different than what you think about wisdom?

How do we teach wisdom in our culture?

Wisdom literature in the Bible teaches us that God is at the center of wisdom and that as we find wisdom, we find God. As we read through wisdom literature, we are reminded that God is at the center of every part of our lives. Following Jesus and worshipping God is not just about giving him 2-3 hours on Sunday morning, a couple of hours for small group, and one hour on Wednesday nights. It’s not even about having time with God each day and then moving on with the day. Wisdom literature reminds us that God is at the center of every part of our day – as we make decisions, we make them seeking his wisdom. As we seek his wisdom, we seek Him and we grow in relationship with Him. Every part of our lives revolves around Him.

Wisdom literature reflects the world that God intended at creation – a world that would be “whole, safe, prosperous, peaceable, just, fruitful, and productive” – marked by *shalom*.\(^\text{17}\) *Shalom* means completeness and peace – it signifies not only the absence of conflict but also the presence of completion, justice, and reconciliation – the world that God intended. Wisdom writings remind us that what we do affects ourselves and others – our actions have real consequences in the world, affecting the world in positive or negative ways as it was meant to be. Our everyday thoughts, words, and actions matter.

\(^{16}\) Sneed, 20.

\(^{17}\) Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen, 384.
How do you think our everyday thoughts, words and actions affect God’s world (the world in which we live, which belongs to God)?

How does our “regular, everyday” life sometimes get disconnected from our spiritual life? What happens when they are disconnected?

Proverbs is not only the baseline for wisdom literature but it is also the most familiar. We have often read Proverbs as if it contained promises – “If I do this…then this will happen” as if God were giving us a blueprint for how to live life. However, as mentioned before, the Proverbs were written based on observations about reality. The sages reflected on what they observed - they paid attention to what was happening and to patterns; over time, they were able to make predictions about what would happen when a certain decision was made.¹⁸ For example, they noticed that those who were lazy might also go hungry while those who worked hard had plenty; they noticed that those who forgave made friends and those who were loyal kept friends. These were not promises God made to people but observations that this is the way life works in a world created by God. Birch, et al, write, “Wisdom teaching is not simply common sense but is studied reflective judgment about reality…”¹⁹ Again, the Proverbs are based on people who studied what they experienced and reflected on it.

Proverbs are written using well-crafted speech – In Proverbs you will find poetry, sayings, images, metaphors, and figures of speech. We will point some of these out as we study the book of Proverbs.

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¹⁸ Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen, 383.

¹⁹ Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen, 383.
What are some sayings of our time that are meant to instruct us or the young?

Examples might include:
A penny saved is a penny earned.
Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.
Still water runs deep.
Actions speak louder than words.
Absence makes the heart grow fonder.
A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.
All’s well that ends well.
A journey of thousands of miles begins with a single step.

**Read Proverbs 1:1-7**, the prologue or introduction to the book of Proverbs.

**Proverbs 1:1** says these are the Proverbs of Solomon.
We have often assumed that since it says, “The Proverbs of Solomon” that the Proverbs were written by Solomon. However, we also might notice a some other attributions in Proverbs that detract from this:
There are references to anonymous wise men or sages:
22:17: The words of the wise:
24:23: These also are sayings of the wise:

There are references to other specific people:
30:1 The words of Agur son of Jakeh. An oracle.
31:1 The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him:

There is a reference to scribes who copied Proverbs at least 200 years after Solomon:
25:1 These are other proverbs of Solomon that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied.

It’s possible that the references to Solomon are meant to place Proverbs in the tradition of Solomon, the infamous king who asked for and was given wisdom and was known for his wisdom. It’s possible that he financed the original project of collecting and arranging the Proverbs and that he authored some of the Proverbs himself. In the ancient world, group authorship was common and did not have to be an individual accomplishment – they would not have viewed it as strange to say “the Proverbs of Solomon” when not every Proverb was by Solomon. Instead, the book reflects the same “spirit of wisdom” that was given to Solomon.

Mark Sneed writes that the authors of the Wisdom Literature were probably primarily teachers and scholars (who we also call sages) – what we might consider to be professors today. It is possible that before the Proverbs were written, they originated in oral form among families as the older members of the family taught the younger ones how to live and behave. The sayings may have been passed down orally until they were written down.

While some scholars believe Proverbs was primarily used for scribes to study, others believe that Proverbs was used by fathers to teach their sons. All scholars believe that the original intention for the use of Proverbs was for older men to

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20 Pemberton, 15.

21 Pemberton, 15.


23 Sneed, 162.
teach younger men. This will be especially important to remember when we read about women in the book of Proverbs.

What is the purpose of Proverbs based on 1:2-6?

The Proverbs are not just a bunch of clever sayings, but they are meant to teach people how to live. Those who are being taught are to listen and understand so they can know how to act. As we will see over and over again, wisdom is not based only on knowledge. Have you ever known someone who knows a lot but has no wisdom? Wisdom requires insight and understanding and action based on that – a head full of information does not equal wisdom.

Look at 1:3 – Wise living looks like dealing wisely, and living with righteousness, justice and equity (NRSV) or doing what is right and just and fair (NIV). This is in line with what God has always been teaching the Israelites:

Genesis 18:19 – God decides to tell Abraham what he is going to do in Sodom because he says, “for I have chosen[e] him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

Abraham’s descendants were always supposed to live in righteousness and justice –

Deuteronomy 4:5-6 – Moses tells the people as they are traveling to the Promised Land, “See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!’”

The people of God are meant to be discerning and wise.

Hosea 14:8, 9:
O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?
   It is I who answer and look after you.
I am like an evergreen cypress;
   your faithfulness comes from me.
**Those who are wise understand these things;**
   **those who are discerning know them.**
**For the ways of the Lord are right,**
   **and the upright walk in them,**
   but transgressors stumble in them.

The Proverbs are teaching the people how to live everyday life in the way that
imitates God, the ways in which God wants them to live – and has always
wanted them to live.

1:4-5 – We see that these proverbs are meant to teach the young men **and** for
wise men to add to their learning –

How can those of us who are older continue to learn, continue to become wise?

**Proverbs 1:7** “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
But wisdom and discipline fools despise”

This verse could be considered the motto for the book of Proverbs.24 “The fear
of the Lord” is used often throughout the book of Proverbs and in other parts of
Scripture. It doesn’t mean to be afraid of God but rather to live in “reverential
awe of God’s sovereignty, goodness and mercy and in obedience to and
relationship with him.”25

**Read Deuteronomy 10:12-13**

24 Sneed, 17.

What does it look like to “fear the Lord?” How can that be the beginning of knowledge?

Fear of the Lord does not just involve worship and feeling – it involves obedience and walking with God. It is incredibly important to note that God is the basis of wisdom – it is our commitment to him and relationship with him that gives us wisdom. The only way that we can truly understand reality is through Him – He is the lens through which we understand what is going on in the world around us.26

This idea continues to be reiterated in the OT and NT. Here are two examples:

Job 12:13 “With him are wisdom and strength; he has advice and discernment”
Revelations 7:12 “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!”

When we do not fear the Lord, we may turn to human wisdom. And human wisdom without God is foolishness. If there is time, read I Corinthians 1:18-25. We see here that Christ is the wisdom of God – his foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. There is no true wisdom without God at the center.

The idea that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and that fools despise wisdom and instruction, adds to the idea found in 1:5 that wisdom is a journey that does not end - we never “arrive.” We are always to seek God and obey him, it is through doing so that we can become wise.

26 Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen, 384.
Summary:
Wisdom Literature was most likely compiled by sages (or scribes or wise men) although many scholars believe it originated in families as the older taught the younger. The sages were one of three groups (priests, prophets, sages) in ancient Israel who taught people about God and how to follow God. The sages were primarily interested in teaching people how to live everyday life in a way that honored God and brought *shalom* to relationships and to the world he created. The Proverbs are concerned with everything that makes up everyday life such as friendships, work, money, family. They are made up of sayings, similar to sayings that we have today that are based on the experience wise people have in the world. In Proverbs 1:1-7, we see that the purpose of the Proverbs is to teach people wisdom, to give them insight and understanding, so that they can become people who do what is right, just and fair and live in disciplined ways. The basis for all wisdom is the fear of the Lord – this could be called the motto of Proverbs.