

LORD, WE HEAR YOUR WORD WITH GLADNESS:

you have spoken – we rejoice:
words of love and life and freedom –
help us make their truth our choice!
Now in holy celebration
for your Word we worship you;
spoken, written, known in Jesus,
ours today to prove anew.

May we hear with understanding,
by your Spirit taught and led;
may the springs of all our being
by your living Word be fed;
may our hearts accept with meekness
all the grace your light makes known;
may obedience mark our footsteps
till we make each word our own!

You have spoken – yours the fulness,
ours the wealth of this your Word:
debtors, then, as living letters,
we must make your Gospel heard!
By your Spirit's power transform us;
shed your saving light abroad
till our lives by love in action
show our world the truth of God!

Margaret Clarkson
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AN OLD TESTAMENT OVERVIEW



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JOB, PROVERBS and ECCLESIASTES

The Old Testament Wisdom Literature

“Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

ROMANS 15:4

THE OLD TESTAMENT WISDOM LITERATURE

Jeremiah's reference in 18:18 to "the teaching of the law by the priest ... the counsel from the wise ... the word from the prophet" indicates the **complementary role that the wisdom of the sage had alongside both prophet and priest** in bringing God's word to Israel.

Job, Proverbs and **Ecclesiastes** are the three Old Testament books known as Wisdom Literature.

Theologically these wisdom books do not draw upon the saving acts of God in Israel's history nor upon God's covenant choosing of a people for their blessing and through them of the nations. Rather, what does unify the wisdom literature is a focus on God as Creator. Proverbs draws upon the orderliness of nature. God finally speaks to the exasperated Job through the majesty of the created order and the writer of Ecclesiastes, after his secularist searchings, challenges his reader to "remember his Creator" in early life.

Old Testament wisdom has two aspects: practical and reflective.

Practical wisdom comprises proverbial sayings: a pithy statement which catches nature's regularity or a brief story or parable which demonstrates that's the way things are: 'life's like that!'

Reflective wisdom embodies thought when popular generalisations are found to be inadequate to account for life's perplexities. This may be in terms of the meaning of existence (e.g. Ecclesiastes) or concerning the suffering of the innocent (e.g. Job). These books provoke thought at a deeper level.

The three Old Testament Wisdom Books complement one another:

Proverbs seems to say: "These are the rules for living; try them and find that they work."

Job and Ecclesiastes reply: "We did ... and they don't!"

PROVERBS

The book is really an anthology of previous collections.

1:1-7 offers a general introduction to the book.

1:8-9:18 is the anonymous first collection. It is a father's warning and advice to his son to obtain wisdom through the fear of the LORD.

10:1-22:16 contains 375 proverbs of King Solomon.

22:17-24:34 gives another collection of proverbs from the 'Wise', with a good deal to say about proper behaviour in the presence of kings and rulers.

25:1-29:27 is the second collection from Solomon's pen.

The book then concludes with three short sections:

30:1-33 are the words of Agur.

31:1-9 give us the teaching of Lemuel.

31:10-31 is an acrostic poem on the ideal wife.

The perspective of Proverbs (perhaps excluding Agur) is essentially uniform. God's moral order can be understood. It is a wisdom and knowledge that come from the fear of the LORD combined with a moral walk. **The way things are ordered in the world of Proverbs is that the good experience prosperity and live long, whereas the wicked know poverty and die early.**

JOB

The unknown author took an age-old story (referred to Ezek. 14: 14) and reclothed it in some of the Bible's finest poetry. Although Job and his three friends were affluent leaders, it is as members of the 'Wise' that we meet them. **Job's real suffering comes not so much from losses and illness, but from the way his experience does not tally with his theology.** The three friends' understanding is that God blesses the good but He punishes the wicked. However they have differing emphases: Eliphaz emphasises God-given experience as the decisive criterion (ch.4). Bildad venerates the traditional wisdom of the past (ch.8) and Zophar is a man of common sense – at its most brutal! (ch.11). Elihu embodies the same causal/retributive philosophy but expresses it with the impatience of youth!

God's answer to Job does not address his questions or grievances. He simply challenges Job to match his power and wisdom in Creation. Job is overawed at God's majesty and repents of his pride. Finally, God, in grace, restores His servant with more than all he lost.

When things cannot be explained in the causal wisdom of Proverbs, Job turns us to God – to trust Him even when it is difficult to grasp His methods or motives.

ECCLESIASTES

Whilst not an atheist, **the author** of Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) adopts a **secularist/humanist view of life** and then pushes the boundaries seeing where this philosophy will lead him. His conclusion is: "Meaningless! – it's all meaningless!". He places himself in the shoes of King Solomon – but it is Solomon in his old age as an apostate king.

When Qohelet does point us to the God in whom he believes, it is a **distant God**: "He is in heaven, you are on earth ... so let your words be few." And He is portrayed as an **ambivalent God**: "no man can know whether love or hate awaits him." (9: 1).

When he throws himself into an indulgent lifestyle ("applied myself to ... madness and folly") the end result is, whether it be sensual pleasure or sophisticated culture – emptiness.

Ultimately Ecclesiastes offers us an emphatic repudiation of all human wisdom, however great, where the fear of the LORD is lacking. The fundamental lesson he has learned is "Fear God and keep His commandments".