

Introduction to the Hebrew Bible
Introduction to Wisdom Literature: Proverbs & Qoheleth
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Wisdom Texts of the Hebrew Bible include: Proverbs, Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), & Job. The primary reason for this identification is the high occurrence of the word *hokmah* within them (some form of the word occurs 318x in HB, over half of these appear in these 3 books). Although *hokmah* is translated as “wisdom”, it can have several meanings: Skill or Ability, Cunning or Cleverness, Sailor’s skill of steering the ship, Guidance through the sea of life, or Rules of the game. Like the Psalms it also contains a superscription, *le Solomon*, which also is not a byline but indicates that wisdom literature was attributed to Solomon because of the tradition celebrating his wisdom. The sources of “wisdom” are uncertain: could have developed from the elders in a family/community or from a class of educated sages. There are many extra-biblical parallels to the wisdom texts of Israel that will be mentioned as they relate to the specific biblical texts.

The 2 most frequent literary forms found in Wisdom Literature are:

1. Saying: positive statement based upon experience. Eg: “Hope deferred makes the heart sick; a wish fulfilled is a tree of life” (Prov 13:12).
2. Admonition: could be positive, but usually negative command about what to do/not do, sometimes with a motivation provided. Eg: “Do not rob the poor because they are poor, nor crush the needy at the gate; for the LORD will defend their cause and will plunder the lives of those who plunder them” (Prov 22:22-23).

These 3 books are also alike in what they lack that the rest of Hebrew Bible has. They have no mention of the following themes/stories: Promise to the Ancestors, Exodus/Moses, Sinai Covenant, and Davidic Covenant. They also share a common set of theological concepts: 1) Wisdom comes from lived experience. 2) It is a search for

order in Nature. 3) Emphasis is placed on God as Creator. 4) It is marked by skepticism (kept the faithful from being over confident). 5) Concerned with Mortality; death is inescapable.

Proverbs

Proverbs is made-up of different collections of wisdom materials. It reveals ANE influence, with strong parallels to an Egyptian text ("Instruction of Amenemope"). Most scholars date the final editing of the book no earlier than the 6th century BCE but probably much later (circa 3rd century BCE). According to Proverbs, Wisdom is not contingent upon a special relationship with God; it is available to anyone who seeks for wisdom. Most of the book supports the *status quo*: the perspective of the rich/powerful who blame the poor/powerless for their own lot in life. This is similar to the DH with its Reward/Punishment approach to life. Proverbs does contain an important and unique concept of Wisdom (Woman Wisdom) as God's Female Partner/Aspect (e.g., Prov 1-9). Later, in Prov 31:1-9, we have the instructions of a mother to her son Lemuel, followed by a poem about a "woman of worth" – a good wife.

Qoheleth/Ecclesiastes

Qoheleth comes from the title given to the source of this text, described as one who gathers/calls together a *qahal*, which is the Hebrew word for "congregation or gathering". Ecclesiastes comes from the Greek title but expresses the same idea; in Greek *ekklesia* means "congregation". Qoheleth was probably someone who convened a group, either in an educational setting or religious one or both. Its composition is often dated to around 300 BCE, with final editing and circulation around 150 BCE. The use of language in Qoheleth is striking for its repetition of certain words/phrases (e.g., toil, work, sun, death, wicked, etc.). The Literary genre is variously described as a

treatise or collection of thoughts. I would describe it as being similar to a 21st century blog. Sayings & admonitions alternate with lengthy reflections.

Key themes of Qoheleth:

1. "Vanity" – word is *hebel* (same root as Abel's name in Gen 4) means "vapor or breath" something insubstantial. The phrase is used "vapor of vapors" (the superlative form), everything in life is utterly futile or impermanent. You'll never figure it out, and there is often no rhyme or reason to life, so just enjoy what you can because it won't last forever. "Go, eat your bread in gladness and drink your wine in joy, for God has long ago approved of what you do" (Qoh 9:7).
2. "Fear of the LORD" – "fear" should be understood more as "awe" or "respect"; a realization that you are not God. God is ultimately in control of the world, but humans will never be able to understand God's reasons for doing things, or allowing things to happen.
3. "Crisis of Faith" -- It reflects perhaps a personal crisis of faith. One who has put years into study, searching after the meaning of life, but finally realizes that it was all futile. Perhaps this person, in the quest for truth, let life pass him/her by and missed out on the joys of living? These reflections are advice for others not to make the same mistake.