

SERMON SERIES ON GENRES OF THE BIBLE

Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?Jerry Truex; June 8, 2008

A. Introduction

Today, we continue our series on the different genres of the Bible. A genre refers to a type of literature or writing. The Bible contains many different types of genre, including law, poetry, narratives, myth, apocalyptic, wisdom, and the list goes on.

Readers bring different expectations to different kinds of literature. Consider the different expectations we bring to the following:

- newspaper editorial vs. newspaper article
- science fiction vs. science textbook
- historical accounts vs. romance novels

The point is: The expectations we have about what we read will affect the way we read them. Knowing whether we are reading a legal code (like the Ten Commandments) or wisdom literature (Proverbs) makes a big difference. The Ten Commandments are absolute demands (apodictic law) without conditions; proverbs are general statements with exceptions depending on the circumstances. To read a proverb as apodictic law would be a big, big mistake.

B. What is wisdom?

Today, we are going to focus on Jewish and Christian wisdom literature. Generally speaking, *wisdom is the art of skillful living*.

From the Jewish-Christian perspective, wisdom is the art of skillful living in a right relationship with God, others, and oneself.¹

"Wisdom is a theological pattern of thinking that applies the 'wisdom' of God to practical issues of life."²

¹ Or wisdom is the ability to skillfully nurture your well-being and the well-being of others, who are manifestations of divine impulse.

² Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 191.

C. Whence comes Wisdom?

1. Culture

Broadly speaking, where is wisdom found in our culture?

Examples: Religious literature, parents, teachers, mentors, counselors, self-help books, fortune cookies, and sometimes movies and popular literature—from people who have discerned how life works; it comes from thoughtful people; it emerges from within.

When we express wisdom in written form, it’s called “wisdom literature”. Usually, wisdom sayings, like the proverbs, are:

- short pithy statements
- invite us to see the world differently
- often humorous
- require us to figure out what the saying means (like a riddle); that is, they are invitational forms of speech, which require effort on our part to discern their meaning (back then-and-there) and derive application for us (here-and-now)

Every culture and time period has wisdom literature. Here are some from different cultures.

Haiti	Weeds can grow anywhere. When you’re in the slaughter house, you must accept blood flying on you.
Kenya	Two guests love a different song. The good milking cow is praised after her death.
Japan	Even monkeys fall from trees.
Native American	There is nothing eloquent as a rattlesnake’s tail.
US	Look before you _____. Actions speak louder than _____. All good things must come to an _____. Strike while the iron is _____.

2. Within

A proverb is divine wisdom in written form. Divine Wisdom originates within a person and may, or may not, be written down. Divine Wisdom wells-up from within a person.

[Ask the congregation to make up a proverb or wisdom saying.]
 “Based your personal experience in the last 24 hours, write a short one or two line proverb that expresses a general truth.”

Here are a few examples that emerged as a result of reflecting on my own experience in the past 24 hours:

- It’s better to sleep at night than to fight it all day.
- Not to take offense is the best defense.
- One book read is better than two on the shelf.

The point is: Wisdom sayings—and Divine Wisdom itself—comes from within us. Each of us has the potential to tap the Divine Wisdom, which flows just below—and sometimes deeply below—the conscious level.³

3. The Bible

The Wisdom literature in the Bible is:

- Proverbs (500 BCE)
- Ecclesiastes (Heb. Qohelet) (250 BCE)
- Job (700-500 BCE)
- Psalms (550 BCE)

From the Apocryphal or Deuterocanonical sources, we also have:

- Wisdom of Solomon (100-30 BCE)
- Sirach (Heb. Ben Sira) (200-180 BCE)

We don’t know precisely who wrote most of the Jewish wisdom literature or when it was written. However, here are some candidates:

- Collected by Jewish kings (Solomon [Prov 1:1]; Hezekiah [Prov 25:1],
- Collections from Egyptian sources (Prov 22:17-24:22, ascribed to “wise men” parallel the wisdom sayings of Amenemope)
- Agur son of Jakeh (Prov 30:1)
- King Lamuel from his mother (Prov 31:1)
- Professional scribes (e.g., Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach; 50:27),
- Jewish school or synagogue settings (Sir 51:23).

³ Transpersonal psychology postulates three levels of unconscious: lower, middle, and higher. The middle unconscious is accessible to conscious thought with some effort. See John Firman and Ann Gila, *Psychosynthesis: A Psychology of the Spirit* (New York: State university of New York Press, 2002)19-34.

D. The Book of Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs has 31 chapters primarily comprised of short wisdom sayings grouped somewhat thematically.⁴

1. Wisdom Poems (Prov 1-9)

a. The Path of Wisdom

The first part of the book—wisdom poems—introduces us to *the central metaphor* of Israel's wisdom tradition—Life is “way” or “path.” Many of the proverbs use images of walking, running, following, stumbling, and falling.

In the first nine chapters, two paths are contrasted: the path of wisdom and the path of folly. Sometimes the two paths are referred to as the way of righteousness and the way of wickedness or the way of life and the way of death. The whole book of Proverbs sets before the reader the two ways and, in this way, encourages the reader to choose.

The starting place for one's journey on the Path of Wisdom is this:

Prov 1:7. ⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (NRSV)

Fear of the Lord does not refer to being afraid. It refers to awe, wonder, and reverence for the Creator. Behind Prov 1:7 is awareness that the search for knowledge—the ability to understand and skillfully cope with life—can go wrong. Awe of God (1:7) or trust in God (3:5) sets a person on the right Path.

The Book of Proverbs assumes that the divine order of creation must be honored. That divine order is not easy or obvious. Seeing the divine order and living in continuity with it requires attentiveness, discernment, and a desire walk the Path of Wisdom.

b. Wisdom/Sophia

The first nine chapters of Proverbs introduce us to the personification of Wisdom in female form—the Wisdom Woman or Sophia.⁵ Following

⁴ Some of the following is from Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001)149ff.

Here is the wise way, and that way lead to life, fulfillment, honor, peace, and happiness.

Prov. 1:20-21. ²⁰ Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. ²¹ At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks ...

Prov 3:13-18. ¹³ Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, ¹⁴ for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold. ¹⁵ She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. ¹⁷ Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy. (NRSV)

Wisdom/Sophia is also talked about as having been with God at the creation of the world:

Prov. 8:1. Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?

Prov. 8:22-23. ²² The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. ²³ Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. (NRSV)

Wisdom/Sophia also offers food and drink. She hosts a banquet and invites all who will come.

Prov. 9:4-6. ⁴ "You that are simple, turn in here!" To those without sense she says, ⁵ "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. ⁶ Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight." (NRSV)

"This personification is the first stage of a process whereby Wisdom/Sophia becomes a female image for God in Jewish wisdom literature."

Wis. 7:21-24. ²¹ I learned both what is secret and what is manifest, ²² for wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me. There is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, ²³ beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent, pure, and altogether subtle. ²⁴ For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things...

Wis. 8:1. She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well. (NRSV)

⁵ Borg, *Reading*, 149.

Wisdom/Sophia is the creative energy of God. Wisdom extends toward all of creation and is within all creation, including you and I. Thus all of creation contains the living Wisdom of God. Wisdom is expressed in Wisdom Literature, but resides or dwells within human beings.

c. The Strange Woman

There is another personification in the first nine chapters of Proverbs—the “Strange Woman,” who represents the Path of Folly. She is portrayed as an adulteress and seductress.

Prov. 7:4-5. ⁴ Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," and call insight your intimate friend, ⁵ that they may keep you from the loose (stronger) woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words...

Prov. 7:21-22. ²¹ With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him. ²² Right away he follows her, and goes like an ox to the slaughter ... (NRSV)

“The two personifications symbolize the two ways of which the book of Proverbs as a whole speaks.”⁶

Follow Sophia—the Path of Wisdom—and you will find life; that is, you will find happiness, fulfillment, harmony, inner peace, and social justice. Follow the Strange Woman—the Path of Folly—and you will find death; that is, you will find unhappiness, anxiety, fear, violence, craving, and social discord.

To follow Sophia, you must discover that Divine Wisdom is present and available in everyday life. Divine Wisdom is near you, within you, accessible to you. But Wisdom sometimes seems to elude us. It can seem hidden. So we must put effort into seeking and discovering Divine Wisdom. But, discovering Divine Wisdom is just the first step. You must also put Wisdom into practice and live by it; to know Wisdom, not with the mind only, but experientially.

2. Discovering Wisdom (Prov 10-30)

In the next section of the Book, chapters 10-30, we are presented with a collection of individual proverbs. Proverbs express common truths—based on

⁶ Borg, *Reading*, 151.

observation about life and human experience—but they arrest the mind and tease the imagination into activity.

Each proverb invites us to see beyond the common place, to become aware of Divine Wisdom, and to walk Her Path.

There are six main areas of human conduct that Proverbs address: relationships, wealth & poverty, diligence & laziness, speech, self-control, and right living.

a. Relationships

[Ask the members to interpret the following sayings and suggest how they might apply to everyday life.]

Prov. 26:17. ¹⁷ Like somebody who takes a passing dog by the ears is one who meddles in the quarrel of another. (NRSV)

Prov. 25:20. ²⁰ Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart. (NRSV)

Prov. 21:9. ⁹ It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a contentious wife. (NRSV)

Prov. 19:14. ¹⁴ House and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the LORD. (NRSV)

Prov. 13:24. ²⁴ Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them. (NRSV)

b. Wealth & poverty

Some proverbs are simply observations about life. What do they help us see?

Prov. 19:4. ⁴ Wealth brings many friends, but the poor are left friendless. (NRSV)

Some sayings recognize that wealth is not good in and of itself and that in some circumstances poverty is better.

Prov. 28:6. ⁶ Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one's ways even though rich. (NRSV)

The poor are also viewed compassionately.

Prov. 14:31. ³¹ Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him. (NRSV)

c. Diligence & laziness

Prov. 26:14. ¹⁴ As a door turns on its hinges, so does a lazy person in bed.

Prov. 20:13. ¹³ Do not love sleep, or else you will come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread. (NRSV)

Prov. 28:19. ¹⁹ Anyone who tills the land will have plenty of bread, but one who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty of poverty. (NRSV)

d. Words

Prov. 29:20. ²⁰ Do you see someone who is hasty in speech? There is more hope for a fool than for anyone like that. (NRSV)

e. Self-control

Prov. 25:28. ²⁸ Like a city breached, without walls, is one who lacks self-control. (NRSV)

f. Rewards for right living

Prov. 11:8. ⁸ The righteous are delivered from trouble, and the wicked get into it instead. (NRSV)

Prov. 12:7. ⁷ The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous will stand. (NRSV)

Prov. 19:16. ¹⁶ Those who keep the commandment will live; those who are heedless of their ways will die. (NRSV)

"The repetition of this theme has a rhetorical function, of course: the purpose of Proverbs is to extol the importance of the path of wisdom, and it does this by affirming again and again, 'Follow the way, and your life will go well!'"

3. Conventional wisdom of proverbs

Proverbs is a book of conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom is what “everybody knows” and it also features the notion that rewards come from living life right. For example:

You reap what you sow.
Work hard and you’ll succeed.
People get what they deserve.
Follow the Lord and you’ll be happy.

Conventional wisdom is often true. We can’t live without it. However, conventional wisdom is not always true. The wicked sometimes prosper. The hard working person may fail. The “subversive wisdom” of Ecclesiastes and Job provide a balance for optimism of Proverbs.

E. Where do we go from here?

1. Read proverbs daily

Read a handful of Proverbs every day. Expect Divine Wisdom to be speaking to you about your life. Proverbs are about you and your life with God. If don’t believe Wisdom is speaking to you, just pretend and see what happens.

2. Read for formation, not information

Read for spiritual formation, not information. To read proverbs effectively, they must be read and pondered one at a time. Meditate on them. Read only a handful at a time or until a certain proverb stimulates an inner dialogue with Divine Wisdom.

Once you hear Divine Wisdom speaking inwardly to you, the proverb has done its work. Close the book and talk to Wisdom about your life.

3. Proverbs are aphorisms, not absolute laws

A proverb is not an absolute law or promise. Of course, they are true in general, but there are always exceptions.

A proverb is aphorism meant to simulate your thinking so you can gain insight into how to live your life skillfully in relation to God, others, and oneself.

