**Session 11: Wisdom Book Part I**

**Psalms, Proverbs, Wisdom, and Sirach**

**Wisdom Literature: an overview**

The collection of books called the Wisdom books – Psalms, Provers, Wisdom, Sirach (or the Book of Ecclesiasticus), Ecclesiastes (or the Book of Qoheleth), Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon), Job – are drastically different from the other books of the both Old and New Testament. The Book of Law – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – are a mix between history and law. The historical book and prophetic books are largely stories and events. The wisdom books, in contrast to the other genera, do not have stories, events, or law. The main purpose of these books is to explore the individual’s relationship with God. The main themes that form the contours of these books are the Deuteronomic Philosophy, the new Israelite philosophy, and the faith life of the people – namely the way they understand God.

**Deuteronomic Philosophy:**

This philosophy came to its climax in the Book of Deuteronomy (hence Deuteronomic Philosophy). The main teaching of this philosophy is that if you follow the laws of God and do what he asks, then you will be rich, have a big family, and not disease or famine will ever strike you. If you, however, do not follow the laws, refuse to do what God asks, or forsake his ways, then you will have disease and famine, your family will die or your wife will become barren, and you will be destitute. As the Israelites lived out this philosophy in their daily life, they realized that this way of living doesn’t work. Not only did it not match their lived experience, but it also caused massive confusion. Think back to the two exiles that the Israelites experienced. Both of these events were colored by the idea that the Israelites had not followed God’s way and now they were being punished. The prophets, on the other hand, challenge the people to see that God didn’t want the punishment and thought of this punishment as too harsh. Now how do we understand God in light of these new revelations? We are not that different from the Israelites. Anyone who examines their life will realize that this philosophy doesn’t work – good people get punished, and evil people seem to prosper. So, now what?

The Wisdom books answer that question – now what? Unfortunately, they do not answer the question directly or even clearly. Instead each of these books form a new type of reflection on the paradigm of the Deuteronomic philosophy. Therefore, we need to be careful when reading these books. The Wisdom books do not contain an answer to the very difficult question of evil and suffering, they don’t describe the proper way of living, and they don’t even try to smooth out the difficulties. Instead, after each book concludes, we are left to ponder the implications of the difficulties in living a *relationship* with God.

The Deuteronomic Philosophy split the people into two camps – the righteous and the sinner. The righteous one followed God’s laws and did what was right and just. The sinner is the one who transgressed God’s laws and did not follow his commands. You may be asking, is there any middle ground between the two? The Wisdom books answer this question with a resounding yes. This paradigm is broadened to include a third category in the Wisdom books – the wicked. Therefore, we now have three different modes of living God’s law.

The Righteous: by now this title seems almost redundant. The righteous person follows God’s law, does what is right and just, and lives a life close to God. This person is also abundantly blest with prosperity and good things.

The Sinner: just a mere paragraph ago the sinner was the wicked person who did not follow God’s law and would not follow his ways. This definition is expanded in the Wisdom books to include a very important element: contrition. The sinner is no longer the wicked person who should be cast out of society, but the person who transgressed God’s laws and seeks forgiveness. In other words the sinner is the one who knows she did not follow God’s laws, repents of that, and seeks forgiveness.

The Wicked: the wicked person is the category added by the wisdom authors. The wicked person is much like the sinner except that he does not wish to repent or find forgiveness. Instead the wicked person desires to transgress the laws and creates injustice.

**The New Israelite Philosophy:**

Are you ready for it? God is God and I am not. Yep, that simple. The Wisdom books are unanimous in making this claim and undeterred in making sure that people understand this message. God does what God desires and we have no right to question his decisions. Similarly, I cannot be God and should therefore work to know my place in the created order of the universe. Think about this line for a moment. If we really want to criticize the simplicity of this notion, think about how often we don’t live it. Nevertheless, the wisdom books bring into center the two main concepts of Israelite philosophy: God is beyond any of us, and we are to follow his ways. No singular idea is more common in the wisdom books than: God is God and I am not.

**Faith Life of the People:**

One of the key tasks of anyone reading the wisdom books is to try to understand what are their context and purpose. Each Psalm and each section of the wisdom books is an Israelite reflecting on their life with God and trying to make sense of this relationship. Sometimes the expression is joyful, and at other times it is somber. Our goal is to try to read out of the wisdom books the sense that the people were feeling when they wrote and prayed this text – were they worshipping? Were they sad, happy, mad, afraid, joyful? Were they reflecting on something difficult or expressing something about their lives? What was their purpose in writing these words?

**Hebrew Poetry:**

Scholars of Hebrew poetry differentiate the styles and forms of poetry into many categories. I find many of these divisions too complicated to be helpful in an every-day reading and praying over these texts. I do, however, think that several divisions are helpful. The most prominent division in Hebrew poetry is in the style or focus of the poem. I sense that most people can pick this out with a quick read of a psalm or a chunk of the Book of Wisdom. Is this passage meant to be for worship or to tell a story or to talk about God? What is the point of the author writing this text? One last point about the genera of the text is the manner of writing. This division goes deeper than simply answering the question of the purpose of the text. Some ideas to keep in mind when reading: was this text written as lyrics to a song? Did the writer intend for the people to respond with a refrain? Does this text seem more like a story or a piece of reflection? What style was the text written in?

The last major division that is worth spending some time and examples understanding is the style of Hebrew poetry. European and American poetry has a specific style that uses rhythm and rhyme to create an atmosphere for the poem. Most of us do not have the advantage of knowing Hebrew well enough to hear the nuances of the Hebrew language come out through their poetry. Nevertheless, Hebrew poetry still has three major division that we can appreciate and use to inform us about the text we are readings. The three major divisions are: parallelism, antithesis, and climax.

Parallelism: the two lines of the poem build upon one another to further express the main point or theme.

Ex. “A wise magistrate lends stability to his people,

And the government of a prudent man is well ordered.” (Sirach 10:1)

Ex. “Because a jealous ear harkens to everything,

And discordant grumblings are no secret.” (Wisdom 1:10)

Antithesis: the second line is in contrast to the second line providing a different character to the original meaning.

Ex. “A man may conceal hatred under dissimilation,

But his malice will be revealed in the assembly.” (Proverbs 26:26)

Ex. “A wise son makes his father glad,

But a foolish son is a grief to his mother.” (Proverbs 10:1)

Climax: the second line expands upon the first line and adds to its meaning.

Ex. “O God, the nations have invaded your heritage,

They have defiled you holy temple,

Have laid Jerusalem in ruins.” (Psalm 79:1)

Ex. “The Lord, the God of gods,

Has spoken and summon the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting.” (Psalm 50:1)

In most cases the poem will be written in two line segments. Each segment of two lines follows one of the above mentioned styles for portraying the message. Thus each section of two lines of texts forms one unit of poetry; they are to be read and understood as one idea. On occasion the segment of the poem will be longer than two lines. The most common number is three but sometimes four lines of text will form one segment. I have never encountered anything longer than four lines. In the case of three lines of text, the first and second or the second and third for a mini-unit that express the first main theme. Then either the second and third or just the third line is the other theme that builds on the first theme. In the case of four lines of text, normally the first and third form one themes with its own mini-theme and the second and fourth form its own mini-theme with the overarching theme expressed by the combination of all four lines, see example below.

Ex. “Fools say in their hearts,

There is no God.

Their deeds are loathsome and corrupt,

Not one does what is right.” (Psalm 53:2)

Lines 1 and 3 expressed the image of what a foolish person looks like: i.e. how they act. Lines 2 and 4 explain the thoughts of a foolish person. Together all fours lines speak of the problem with foolish people.

**The Book of Psalms:**

By far, outside of the New Testament, this is the book people are most familiar with. This make sense considering we hear a psalm proclaimed every Sunday but not necessarily the other books of the Bible outside the Gospels. The Book of Psalms has some complications with it. We don’t know who is the author of the Psalms. Tradition held for many years that King David wrote the Psalms. Although we know he wrote several of them, modern scholar concluded that King David did not write all of the Psalms. Some of the Psalms are from different time periods and are thematically very different from those we know were written by King David. I hope this doesn’t cause you distress. The Psalms in their most basic form are expressions, in song, of the beliefs and experiences of the Israelite people. The content of the Psalms express nearly every human emotion and guide the reader/listener into an experience of God through that emotion. The Psalms in the most basic sense are songs. The Psalms are not in any particular order, neither thematic or chronological. Instead the book is a complication of these songs. If you have perused through this book in some depth, you have may have noticed something strange about the psalm number, i.e. Psalm 50. Not all editions of the Bible have the same numbering for the Psalms. Both the Hebrew Psalter and the Septuagint Psalter contain 150 psalms. Due to a different way of dividing the Psalms between the Hebrew Psalter and the Septuagint Psalter, the Septuagint Psalter is one number behind the Hebrew Psalter. Psalms 1-9 are the same numbers, 10-147 are one number behind in the Septuagint, and Psalms 148-150 are the same. As we read this books, don’t let the numbers throw you off. Instead, enjoy the poetry and try to let yourself dive into the richness of the text.

Psalm 4

Psalm 122: This psalm is a liturgical psalm; it relays the events of entering the temple.

Psalm 137: A song from exile

**The Book of Proverbs:**

The focus of the Book of Proverbs is Wisdom. Wisdom is a fascinating character in that she (yes, she) doesn’t really make an appearance and her exact nature is unknown. The character of Wisdom is normally a personification of the wisdom of God, a force that attracts men to herself and scares off those who are unworthy. The Book of Proverbs is a collection of wisdom saying from many different sources. Our editors have make subheadings for us to help make the distinctions in the text necessary for understanding the underlying meaning.

Structure:

1. The value of Wisdom (Proverbs 1-9)
2. Proverbs of Solomon (Proverbs 10-29)
3. Proverbs of Agur (Proverbs 30)
4. Words of Lemuel (Proverbs 31:1-9)
5. The ideal wife (Proverbs 31:10-31)

Proverb 1: In the first four chapters of the Book of Proverbs the writer makes clear who Wisdom is and why she is important. Wisdom is that force that keeps the person on the straight and narrow with God and keeps all things in their proper places. Also in these first few verses, we see a theme that runs through the Books of Proverbs and Wisdom: a father teaching his son wisdom.

**The Book of Wisdom:**

The Book of Wisdom is an odd book of the Old Testament. When most people think of the Old Testament, they think of the Hebrew language and the events of the year of Abraham through King David. Neither of these are true for the Book of Wisdom. This book was written during the years of the Greek occupation of the land of Israel, which means that the predominant language is Greek not Hebrew. Similarly, the Greek introduced their philosophies and manner of viewing the world into Jewish lore. This led to the Book of Wisdom. This book uses Greek philosophy and the themes that comes out of that philosophy to further expand upon the quest for understanding their relationship with God.

Structure:

1. Rewards for justice (1:1-6:21)
2. Solomon’s Wisdom (6:22-11:1)
3. God’s providence during the exile (11:2-19:22)

Wisdom 1:16—2:9: The themes of the wicked and the righteous come to the fore in this passage. Also, themes from other texts are drawn in to express the providence of God and the necessity of following his ways.

Wisdom 4:7-11

Wisdom 11:2-5: The Exodus returns: remember, the Exodus is a pivotal role in the understanding of the Israelites as a people and their understanding of God. This theme is the most common refrain throughout the entirety of Scripture.

**The Book of Sirach:**

The title of the “Book of Sirach” may throw a few people off. The book is also titled “The Wisdom of the Son of Sirach”, and in Latin “Ecclesiasticus”. The book has a similar style to the Book of Wisdom and Proverbs in that it is written in the poetic style common to Hebrew poetry and focuses on specific themes. Like the Book of Wisdom that focuses on Wisdom, the author of Sirach focus on law, priesthood, temple, and worship. This book has no particular style but instead each chapter is, more-or-less, its own unit.

Chapter 2:

Chapter 5:11-17: This passage contains great examples of the Hebrew poetic style.