

Lesson 12: Grammatical Interpretation (part 7)

GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING WISDOM WRITINGS

Introduction: The wisdom writings (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, & portions of Psalms) provide counsel for living in God's world in the midst of life's many choices & challenges.

I. Guideline 1: Do not expect wisdom literature to communicate like other kinds of writings.

- A. Wisdom literature unveils the governing **principles** of life in a world made by God & corrupted by sin.
- B. Don't read wisdom literature like law or prophecy. It's not about immutable rules or **airtight** promises.
- C. Wisdom lit. is rooted differently than other parts of the OT.
 1. All of the OT after Deuteronomy grows out of the covenant God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai. But the wisdom writings connect to it differently.
 2. The wisdom writings are rooted more in **Genesis** than Deuteronomy.
 - a. Most of the Prophets show how Israel related to the Mosaic Covt and reaped the blessings or curses of Deut.
 - b. Wisdom books are more rooted in the knowledge of God's **order** within the creation.
 - [1] Job lived in the time of Jacob & Esau 4 centuries before the Mosaic Covenant.
 - [2] Prov & Eccles focus on living in a fallen world, but there's little mention of the Law.
 - [3] Song of Solomon deals with the love relationship of a couple, & much of the book is rooted in Genesis.
 - c. Wisdom writings focus more on the individual than on the

covenant people as a whole. This is evident even in the way wisdom writings begin.

[1] Psalm 1:1, "Blessed is the man..."

[2] Job 1:2, "There was a man..."

[3] Proverbs 1:5, "A wise man will hear..."

[4] Song of Solomon, "May he kiss me"

[5] Ecclesiastes 1:3, "What advantage does a man have in all his work?"

II. Expect to find variety in the ways wisdom is expressed.

A. Poetry and Prose.

1. Most wisdom literature is written as **poetry**.
 - a. For instance, every line in Proverbs is poetry except for the few headings throughout it.
 - b. Song of Sol. is entirely in poetry (except for the heading).
 - c. All of the wisdom psalms (e.g. 1, 19, 119) are poetic.
2. Ecclesiastes & Job contain large sections of prose.
 - a. Eccles. contains some poems but is mostly prose.
 - b. While Job is written mostly in poetry, the long opening and close are narrative.
3. Why is this important? Poetry utilizes several features that are important to bear in mind in interpretation.
 - a. Economy of expression which forces more contemplation.
 - b. The use of **parallel** lines which enables reiteration.
 - c. **Figurative** language. Be careful about reading poetic talk in a woodenly literal way.

B. Different Types of Discussion.

1. **Moral Lectures.** For instance, Prov. 1-9 is written as the counsel of a father to his son.
2. **Individual Sayings & Maxims.** Prov. 10–29 contains a collection of loosely arranged wise sayings.
3. **Extended Discussions.**
 - a. Job features arguments with his well-meaning, mis-guided friends, all who speak like wise men.
 - b. Ecclesiastes contains Solomon’s ponderings as he moves from one tentative conclusion to the next.
4. Wisdom Poems (Psalm 1; Prov. 31)

C. Different Approaches to Wisdom

1. Conventional Biblical Wisdom.

- a. Proverbs might be called a book of inspired conventional wisdom.
- b. It describes things as they **normally** are and prescribes things as they normally should be.
- c. Understanding Prov. as conventional wisdom is key to interpreting its many promises as non-absolute.
- d. Prov imparts skill for living, sharing the Creator’s wisdom with the naïve so they not walk foolishly into evil.

2. **Alternative** Biblical Wisdom.

- a. Job and Eccles. provide alternative wisdom, dealing with the extreme situations and perplexities of life.
- b. These books deal with frustrating & confusing situations where conventional wisdom doesn’t seem to work.

- c. David Hubbard, “Proverbs seems to say, ‘Here are the rules for life; try them & see they will work.’ Job & Ecclesiastes say, ‘We did, & they don’t.’”

[1] That quote above is overstated, but it latches on to something true.

[2] In the Hebrew Bible, the books of wisdom are arranged so that one **switches** between reading alternative and conventional wisdom.

[a] Job (altern. wisdom) to Proverbs (conv. wisdom) to Ecclesiastes (altern. wisdom).

[b] Each books needs to be read in light of the other so you don’t get unbalanced wisdom.

III. Realize that there are **Limitations** to Wisdom Literature.

- A. Some proverbs are true for one circumstance while other proverbs are true for others. Example: Prov. 26:4-5.

1. **Pr 26:4.** Sometimes the worst thing to do when talking with a fool is to enter his foolish loop & try reasoning with him.
2. **Pr 26:5.** Sometimes it’s best to talk your way down a foolish path of thought to show the fool how hopeless it is.

- B. Treat proverbs as general principles, not absolute promises (unless the text demands it). This can spare hurt & doubt.

1. **Prov. 15:1**, “A soft answer turns away wrath,” but that didn’t spare the Lord Jesus.
2. **Prov. 17:17**, “A friend loves at all times,” but even the best of friends can fail.
3. **Prov. 11:8**, The righteous man is rescued from trouble & it comes on the wicked instead,” but that wasn’t true of the NT martyrs.
4. **Prov. 22:6**, “train up a child in the way in which he will go,”