

Introduction to Wisdom Literature, I

Continuing our discussion of the imprecations in the psalms, it still does seem as though vengeance and outrage of sin could be expressed in other ways, and is expressed in other ways elsewhere in Scripture. Do we still feel uncomfortable with this kind of expression? I think that, in a way, these are eschatological sentiments that are being expressed in the Psalms. There will come a time when God's wrath will materialize on the unrepentant and the persistently rebellious, the incorrigible who refuse to say Christ is Lord. They will be the recipients of God's wrath. But we are still living in a time of common grace where we do not know who the wheat and the weeds are, so we pray for all. But there is the intrusion of the consummation into this time frame of common grace. We see that in the Israelite genocide of the Canaanites as God brought the people of Israel into the land of Canaan and commanded them to dispossess, drive out, and execute that population. God's command did not reflect a retarded development in ethics, but rather anticipated eschatology, the ethics of final judgment being seen already in the time of common grace. This shocks us when it happens. Also, it is far better to pour out your outrage to God and say, "God, You deal with it because I cannot," than to take matters into your own hands, which is often the alternative.

We will now turn to discuss wisdom in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East (ANE). I would like to break down this discussion into three parts. When we are talking about wisdom, we want to talk about its corpus, its character, and its contribution to our lives.

First of all, what is the corpus of wisdom books? The major wisdom books are Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. In the non-canonical apocrypha (from a Protestant perspective) there are Ecclesiasticus, often called the Shirac, and the Wisdom of Solomon. Other canonical wisdom books are the Songs of Songs and Lamentations. Song of Songs is closely associated with Solomon, and Lamentations is epitomized by its acrostic form. Most of the chapters of Lamentations are in acrostic form, alphabetic acrostics. This acrostic form is very typical for wisdom writing. For these reasons, and because of the imagery and poetical forms employed in both, these two compositions have come to be included in the corpus of wisdom books.

What about the character of wisdom literature? There are two types of wisdom: prudential wisdom and speculative wisdom. What is the difference? Prudence means "A reasonable, cautious, common sense approach; circumspect." It can also be defined as the ability to regulate and discipline oneself through the exercise of reason, to be regulated and disciplined, having common sense, or acting wisely. It can also refer to skill in the management of practical affairs. Prudential wisdom may be labeled as "practical insights about life and how to live it." Prudential wisdom is found in abundance in Proverbs. Other terms are often used for prudential wisdom, such as proverbial wisdom. But that term is too narrow. There are many proverbs that are prudential in nature. But there are other forms of prudential wisdom as well—didactic, for instance. What is the form and content of prudential wisdom? Prudential sayings are "short, pithy sayings that state rules for personal happiness and welfare, or condense the wisdom of experience and make acute observations about life." These wisdom sayings are fairly universal. They are found in most cultures we know anything about. "Proverbs have been found almost everywhere in the world, in almost every period in human history. Aphoristic thinking, or aphorism, is a synonym for proverb. Proverbs seem to be a universal phenomenon. Thompson suggests it may be one of the oldest of man's speech forms. Do not misunderstand him. He is not saying the first speech uttered by man was a proverb. He means that the wise saying may have been the first special form of speech to be uttered by human beings.

There are many African proverbs. “Where there is more than enough, more than enough is wasted.” In the West we might say, “Waste not, want not,” or, “Increased income leads to increased expenditure.” Here is another one: “The journey of folly has to be traveled a second time.” A similar Western proverb is “Trick me once, shame on you, trick me twice, shame on me,” and “He who does not learn from his mistakes is doomed to repeat them.” Another African proverb is “Today’s satiety [satisfaction] is tomorrow’s hunger.” We can understand that because it makes sense, and we can visualize it. We do not necessarily need any specialized knowledge to understand it. Another one is “Sticks in a bundle are unbreakable.” The Bible says, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12). An Arabic proverb says, “Two dogs killed a lion.” This is talking about what we in the West call strength in numbers. All of these are generally understandable to those from different cultures, but there are other proverbs where the meaning is anything but obvious to those outside the culture. One African proverb says, “The earth is a beehive. We all enter by the same door, but live in different cells.” Beehives have one entrance. Perhaps that is speaking of the commonality of human experience and yet the great diversity of humankind. This other African proverb is even more incomprehensible to me: “Big nose has not grown his nose. Big feet has not softened the road.”

Sometimes in order to understand a proverb from another culture you have to do a little research. It is the same with biblical proverbs. “Is Saul also among the prophets?” This is a saying of Israel, but what does it mean? We have it in two contexts. At the time of Saul’s anointing he began prophesying. And some asked, “What has happened to the son of Kish? Is even Saul one of the prophets?” Another person asked, “Well, who is their father?” which could mean, “Who is their leader?” or “Why are you worried about heredity?” “Why are you so shocked that Saul is there?” Later in the book of Samuel Saul is seeking David’s life. He sends men to tell David he is coming to kill him. But when the messengers reach the place where David is hiding with Samuel there is a worship service going on and they join in. They are not getting the job done, so Saul sets off to deal with David himself. Along the way, the Spirit came upon him, and he went along prophesying. Thus people again said, “Is even Saul among the prophets?” By this time the people knew that he was not, though he on occasion appeared to be, for his sole purpose in going to this place was to kill David. His prophecy was not a heartfelt thing. Appearances can be deceiving. So probably the time to use that phrase is when you see someone and you doubt their sincerity. My point here is that sometimes we have to struggle to figure out what proverbs mean. That is another aspect of the prudential aspect of the wisdom literature.

Another aspect of the character of wisdom sayings is their concreteness. The proverbial lore of the ANE is generally distinguished by the graphic quality of the concreteness of the imagery. Proverbs 11:22 says, “Like a gold ring in a swine’s snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.” You cannot get more graphic than that. What a wasted beauty is the woman with no discretion. We in the West say, “Beauty is as beauty does.” If you really want to be beautiful, you have to be beautiful on the inside. By the way, by the time you get older what is on the inside will come out. Another one of our sayings is, “A word to the wise is sufficient.” Notice how the same principle is stated in Proverbs 17:10: “A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows to a fool.” This is a more graphic and concrete image than our proverb. “Spend no day in idleness or you will be beaten. The ear of a boy is on his back and he harkens when he is beaten.” This saying comes from Near Eastern culture, and it is also very graphic.

Much of the power of a proverb is in this graphic feature. Another source of their power is in the brevity. Unlike the lectures I give about them, the proverbs themselves are very brief. In our own abstract Western way, we capitalize on the brevity feature. Some of our wise sayings are, “A rolling stone gathers no moss,” “A penny saved is a penny earned,” “A stitch in time saves nine,” and “Look before you leap.” We tend to focus on these brief ones. But even some of our favorite ones are still very graphic: “The early bird catches the worm,” “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,” and “People

in glass houses should not throw stones.” All of these conjure up images. There is also a tendency to increase brevity by abbreviating the saying. Thus, “A stitch in time saves nine,” becomes, “a stitch in time.” Those from other cultures who read or hear simply “A stitch in time” would have to do some research to make sense of it. Similarly, we have to struggle with some of these proverbs to make sense of them. The authors of the wisdom sayings could make it briefer because they shared the same language, culture, and history with their audience.

We have been discussing prudential wisdom. There is also speculative wisdom. Under what circumstances should you take a guess, or speculate? You might have insufficient information and thus you are left to speculate. Some people are bothered by the fact that there is speculation in the Bible, because we tend to look down on speculation as something we should not do. But what do we mean by speculative wisdom? Speculation can be defined as “To ponder, to contemplate a subject in its different aspects and relations, to meditate and especially theorize from conjectures without sufficient evidence.” There is a place for that in Scripture, especially in Job and Ecclesiastes. Others call this contemplative wisdom, but I think the title speculative wisdom is appropriate because it focuses on this idea of being “without sufficient information.” Job’s friends are trying to discover the cause of Job’s suffering. They have one idea they are trying to pound into his brain: “You must have sinned, Job, because God is just.” His response to this is, “If your theory is correct, then why are you so comfortable?” He has another idea. “I know my heart, I know my integrity. There must be something else going on. Maybe God is not just.” In the end, God has to say to Job, “Who is this who says to me words without knowledge? Who is this speculating?” This is speculative wisdom. Metaphorically, there is much that we cannot see clearly or can only barely glimpse. Thus we wrestle with what is not obvious.

When we talk about wisdom in Scripture, we are talking about prudential wisdom. We find the speculative wisdom in Job and Ecclesiastes. Man’s knowledge is limited, which is one major point made in the book of Job. Think about what happens when God finally appears to Job at the end of the book. He does not answer all his questions, does He?

Some summary definitions: what is wisdom in the Bible? One author says it is the ability to cope. Another says it is the art of steering. Another says it is practical knowledge of the laws of life and the world based on experience. These are all appropriate definitions of prudential wisdom. Another says it is parents’ legacy to their children. Another definition is the quest for self-understanding and the world. What is a definition that might tie together speculative and prudential wisdom? Kidner’s illustration is good: wisdom in the Bible is that which we can see clearly, and that which we can only see at a distance, not so clearly. In my definition I have tried to describe the two strains of wisdom: wisdom is instruction in those areas where life’s answers are forthcoming and wrestling where they are not. In the book of Proverbs we have a great deal of instruction. In Job and Ecclesiastes we have a great deal of wrestling to find meaning and explanation of suffering.