

Wisdom Traditions in the Hebrew Bible

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INTRODUCTION

PRACTICAL ADVICE ON FARMING, choosing a wife, table manners at court, as well as speculations on the nature of divine justice and the mysteries of nature—these are just a few of the topics which are covered in the wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible. Together, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs represent the work of the elite bureaucrats (“wise men”) and teachers who kept alive vigorous oral traditions of the villages of the tribal and monarchic periods of early Israel. They served as some of the theologians and editors who brought the people’s literature together for preservation during the Exilic and post-Exilic periods. It is to them that we owe a debt that the “little things” of life, the day-to-day knowledge of God’s blessings in the world, were retained along with the sweeping stories of liberation and peoplehood.

The wisdom books are part of the third division of the Hebrew Bible (HB), that are known as “Ketuvim,” or “Writings.” While so much of the HB is taken to represent *God’s* words to humanity, the Writings give us another way to understand scripture—when we find the words of *people* back to God are also understood to be “inspired.” Both are valued and find their place in the canon, for each is necessary if the people are to know their own story. Wisdom differs from much of the Bible, however, not only in style (poetry predominates over prose) but in content as well. Some of these differences might have their origin in the fact that Israel’s wisdom literature was modeled upon that of her surrounding neighbors: in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia, the writings of court diplomats, scribes, teachers, and counselors operating out of temple schools or court bureaucracies had created a body of knowledge from the earliest times. Israel’s wisdom can often be shown to draw directly on knowledge of such traditions through its incorporation of forms, themes, and stories found in the “parallel” literature of these great civilizations.

Hence, we find that wisdom literature does not speak in quite the same tongue as its companions of Torah and Former Prophets. God appears in wisdom literature as the Creator and Sustainer of the natural world; the Redeemer of the Exodus and Exile is a less important metaphor for the divine in the wisdom traditions. Further, the notion of Israel as the "special" or elected people, chosen by God for a special destiny, is largely absent from these books although the piety of the covenanted community undergirds and serves as a backdrop for most of wisdom's teachings. The sages believed in the goodness of created life and that one could find (or impose) an order on one's experiences which would allow a prosperous, full life. Optimistic (at least in the Book of Proverbs), these biblical teachers believed that people *could* learn, make informed choices, and live in harmony with their creator. This initial perspective was modified by the trauma of the Exile and the loss of nationhood, and some of the most profound soul-searching questions about the meaning of these events and the life that followed them are to be found in the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes.¹ The sages' view of wisdom mutates over time in the aftermath of their people's sufferings and restored fortunes: personified Wisdom who appears as something of a Scribal Goddess, Female Scold, and loving Mother/Sister/Bride in Proverbs becomes deeply hidden in Job, and largely absent or irrelevant in Ecclesiastes. We hear the echo of her voice again with the Song of Song's triumphant celebration of embodied love in the midst of a fruitful creation. It is no wonder that the earliest Christian communities viewed Jesus as a Wisdom Sage, speaking in proverbs and parables, sent as a prophet of Wisdom/Sophia, and beloved Bridegroom of the soul.²

PROVERBS

The oldest of the wisdom books in that it incorporates both tribal oral materials as well as monarchic collections of teachings, Proverbs sets the tone for the wisdom category of the Writings. Officially the book is attributed to Solomon, but analysis of the internal structure and vocabulary suggests that this is a traditional ascription rather than a factual one. Solomon, as patron of wisdom teachers and master of great personal wisdom, becomes a root figure for wisdom literature, just as his father David does for the Psalms (although we know not all psalms were composed or even used

1. Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990, 1996), 1-14, 111-50; James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, rev. and enlarged (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1998), 1-54, 205-28; Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972); Dianne Bergant, *Israel's Wisdom Literature: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

2. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994).

by David). This official “fiction” of Solomonic authorship carries through the material; the tradition holds that when Solomon was a young man, he composed the Song of Songs; when in his middle years, he wrote the Book of Proverbs; and in old age, he spoke as Ecclesiastes. While this view of authorship does not hold up to critical scrutiny, it *does* accurately reflect the changing tone in these biblical books.

Proverbs contains material which is very late (Prov. 1-9, 30-31)—clearly reflecting the concerns and social locations of the postExilic community—forming a circle around the earlier material in the proverb collections (chaps. 10-29), which also display their own arrangements by theme or time frame. Scholars speculate that some of the earlier proverbs probably circulated first in oral form and originated in the concerns of village life of the tribes and early monarchy, but confirmation of any individual form as originally oral is difficult.³ The most basic literary form found in the book is the “mashal” or proverb—two-line sayings clearly reflecting an attempt at literary shaping, and whose metaphorical associations allowed for applying its insight to a variety of social situations. Such sayings usually occur in poetic parallelism, with the second line restating or furthering the thought of the first, often by way of contrast. For example, in Prov 10:5, we read:

A son who gathers in summer is prudent,
but a son who sleeps in harvest brings shame. (RSV)

Contrast this with Prov 10:15:

A rich man’s wealth is his strong city;
the poverty of the poor is their ruin.

While each proverb offers an implicit judgment on which situation is preferable, it should be noted that the basic data presented are drawn from observations which anyone might make just by paying attention to the ways of the world. In wisdom studies, this dynamic is known as the “act-consequence” relationship: every deed contains the seed of its own outcome. Good and diligent works produce good consequences, and there is a general sense of the harmony between action and result, which a person may trust. It is this very connection, which forces the wisdom tradition to reexamine its foundational beliefs when the fate of the people of God offers a direct challenge to wisdom’s naive assumption of a routine correspondence between goodness and good fortune. While this earlier reliance on act-consequence could cause the wisdom of Proverbs to seem a staunch supporter of the status quo—as though the poor deserved to be poor, and the rich had merited their blessings—the thinkers speaking in Job and Ecclesiastes will point out that things are not quite as easy to categorize as all that.

3. Murphy, 15-32; Crenshaw, 55-88; Carole R. Fontaine, *Traditional Sayings in the Old Testament: A Contextual Study* (Sheffield, U.K.: Almond Press, 1982); Claus Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995).

Beyond the basic form of the two-line saying, we find other forms employed in Proverbs, especially the later materials in chapters 1-9 and at the end of the book. Here we see unified compositions which go on for several stanzas: wisdom poems (celebrating wisdom's excellence, or with Wisdom, personified as female, speaking in first person), instructions (teachings directed from father to son, based on Egyptian models), numerical sayings, admonitions, and prohibitions. These larger compositions are clearly put together with a frank desire to teach and challenge youth to pick the right path; they depart from the simple observations of the village world and press their readers/hearers (largely male in antiquity) to choose wisely in a way approved by their elders and the weight of tradition. This is nicely summed up in the introductory lines to the book, which function almost as a modern "course syllabus" might:

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

That men may know wisdom and instruction, understand words of insight,

receive instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity;

that prudence may be given to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth—the wise man also may hear and increase in learning, and the man of understanding acquire skill,

to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;

fools despise wisdom and instruction. (1:1-7; RSV)⁴

In these statements, "fear of the Lord" clearly means more than simple fear. It reflects instead an attitude of awe and obedience in relationship to the eternal source of Israel's strength and historical deliverance. "Fear of the Lord" is a favorite expression in Deuteronomy where it acts as a sort of "cover" term for all of Hebrew religion and carries the explicit requirement of obedience to the Laws of the Torah. Our sages, however, mean even more than that when they invoke this idea at the outset of their teachings. For the wisdom tradition, "fear/awe of the Lord" is *also* the proper intellectual attitude to foster in one's students and oneself. A firm grounding in faith is the clear prerequisite for any intellectual or practical endeavor. In this world view, "foolishness" means more than ignorance; it implies an outright flaunting or rejection of the moral order of the world, seeded into its structure by the Creator.

One of the most foolish things one can do, according to Proverbs' teachings, is to ignore or trivialize the teachings and presence of Lady

4. I select the RSV as preferred translation here because, despite the modern sensitivity to the need for inclusive translations, wisdom literature is composed by males, aimed at a male audience, and revolves around male-identified concerns.

Wisdom. This extraordinary figure appears at the beginning of the book in almost celestial dress: She calls out in public places (normally reserved for men) in the strong tones of an angry prophet or scolding mother. Her claims are many: that she was God's first acquisition at the time of creation; that she was brought forth ("given birth to") by God and served as the master principle (plan) or artisan (co-creator) for the work of creation. All rulership is based on knowledge of her; all good things are in her hands to bestow on those who honor her. In all, she promises "life"—something that normally only God or Messiah can deliver—as well as success to those who take her seriously; of those who do not, she says she will scorn them on their day of distress, just as they scorned her outstretched hand (Prov. 1-9).

It goes without saying that this female figure is a rather striking departure from the ancient world's entrenched patriarchy in which the societies of the Bible took part. Here is a poetic figure who is certainly *more* than human and also clearly female. Do we see here the beginning of a chink in the armor of exclusion whereby patriarchy assigns most public, high-status roles to men and sees women as primarily breeders and household managers who advance men's lives? In fact, Lady or Woman Wisdom did not emerge fully grown out of nowhere like Athene, another goddess of wisdom, leaping from the brow of Zeus. Not only did surrounding cultures have scribal goddesses who served as protectors of the scribal guild, but Israel itself worshipped the (probably Canaanite in origin) goddess Asherah in the Jerusalem temple as the legitimate consort of God. This mother-goddess, often imaged in fertility terms or as a sacred tree/pole from which creatures fed (strongly reminiscent of the "Tree of Life" motif used for Lady Wisdom), is known to scholars of the Late Bronze Age from her appearances in Ugaritic epics where she is the consort of the high god El. Beyond these probable associations, the figure of Lady Wisdom offers a fresh incarnation of the strong and devoted women who people the Torah and historical books with their crafty, formidable participation in seeing to it that God's promises to the people are realized. The poem praising the "Strong Woman" (or: "Good Wife"; "Woman of Worth") in Prov. 31 amply demonstrates the central role that such female matriarchs played in the well-being of their families. It calls to mind the mothers of the faith, and that poem's link to terminology used for Lady Wisdom invites us to interpret that literary figure through the dual lens of divine and human modalities. It is certainly true that biblical societies shared the same patriarchal expectations, good and evil, about their female populations and that these might very well be dismissed as male propaganda for insuring the second-class citizenship of women in the household of faith. It is nevertheless important to recognize that the roles projected onto Lady Wisdom reflect a view of the female as strong, effective, intelligent, and noble. Though She is a patriarchally subordinated figure, Lady Wisdom is a key figure for establishing

the essential dignity and worth of Her human daughters and ought not to be overlooked, however uncomfortable Her presence may make those who insist that monotheism is the hallmark of the Hebrew Bible.⁵

THE BOOK OF JOB

No other book in the Hebrew Bible has as many scholarly disputes about its date, nature, and meaning as this astonishing piece of high poetry.⁶ The piece has no fully conclusive date or life-setting: scholars generally date it to the period of the Babylonian Exile or the Persian Restoration based on the topic, but it contains materials which are both early (the ancient Near Eastern folktale about the Righteous Sufferer in chapters 1-2, 42:7-17) and late (the Hebrew of the Elihu speeches in chaps. 27-32 clearly differs from the bulk of the work). If the book is designed to respond to the social conditions of the Exilic or post-Exilic community, its response is certainly quite subtle since no explicit mention of either event is found in the text (12:13-25). Indeed, the hero Job is an Edomite desert chieftain and not a Jew at all—perhaps a strategy to allow his blasphemous complaints against God (e.g., 9:22-24, etc.) to go uncensored by pious audiences.

The text as we have it explores, from a more-or-less⁷ monotheistic point of view, the problems of undeserved suffering and knowledge of divine ways posed already by both Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures well before the final editing of Job in the genre broadly known as “problem literature.” But no easy answers are available to salve the traditional theologies of the Babylonian captives, the cream of their society (Job was “greatest of all the sons of the East”), or of the “restored” but dazed pioneers of the Persian period attempting to rebuild their lives and their temple under new

5. Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield, U.K.: Almond Press, 1985); Carole R. Fontaine, “The Social Roles of Women in the World of Wisdom,” in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 24-49; Bernhard Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1986); Judith M. Hadley, “From Goddess to Literary Construct: The Transformation of Asherah into Hokmah,” in Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine, eds., *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods, Strategies* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 360-99; Gerlinde Baumann, “A Figure with Many Facets: The Literary and Theological Functions of Personified Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9,” in Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine, eds., *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom and Psalms* (Second Series) (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 44-78.

6. Most of the words in the Hebrew Bible which appear only once (hapax legomena) are to be found in the Book of Job. Translations for them vary widely, depending on the scholarly strategy used for their proposed definitions. For readable introductions to the book, see Murphy, 33-47; Crenshaw, 89-115; Norman Habel, *The Book of Job*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985); J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985).

7. See note 8.

overlords and despite the none-too-enthusiastic population they had left behind. Their sufferings could not be blamed on hostile demons⁸ nor an aggressive pantheon seeking to overthrow its high god: both good and evil *must* come from the hands of the One Lord with whom the Jewish community still believed itself to be in a covenant relationship. This is the poignant message of the “patient” Job of the folktale Prologue: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (1:21); a position he continues to elaborate after a second series of disasters strikes him in Job 2:10b, “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” Indeed. That is the question.

The irony of the book is heightened by the fact that the audience, which has been given the folktale “set-up” for the heavenly contest over the “disinterested” nature of human faith, actually knows *more* about what is happening to Job than do any of the human characters. In effect, the reader/hearer shares the hidden knowledge of Heaven: however much Job may wonder what on earth—or in hell—is happening to his successful life, we the audience *know* that what follows is a test, albeit a hideous one, yet one in which Job’s ultimate survival is not at stake (1:12; 2:6). If it seems as though we are eavesdropping on a cosmic experiment where the scientists are placing side-bets on the lab rats, we are not far off the mark.⁹

The structure of the book is designed to suggest to the readers/hearers that there is no *one* answer to the problem of divine deeds and human suffering. The dialogue found in the center section of the “sandwich” arrangement, framed as it is by the pious folktale, gives us a very different portrait of Job, which is at odds with that of the folktale, and this strategy allows the poet to delve into the various responses to affliction. The friends, like those in Mesopotamian texts, put forward various views from traditional theological thinking: that suffering is a just punishment for sin, that no one can be held blameless when judged by divine standards, that torment may be sent as a test, a cleansing ritual for reconciliation or a warning. They suspect that Job could only be experiencing such misfortune if he *had* actually sinned: for them the act leads infallibly to the consequence. These speakers for tradition counsel their friend to seek God, repent, and be restored—and once again the author makes deft use of irony, for in the last chapters this is exactly what Job will do! In the interim, however, Job rejects all these explanations as inadequate to explain the extremity of his

8. Although the book is usually held to be a monotheistic work, the ambivalent figure of the Satan who, while not co-equal to God, is nonetheless able to challenge and manipulate this divine Creator, suggests to the present writer that not all polytheistic questions have been resolved by the community. The dualism of these good and evil divine figures is usually explained as Persian influence.

9. Edwin M. Good, *In Turns of Tempest* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990).

torment, especially given the “good” life he has led up until these wretched turns of fortune. Neither Job nor the friends experience any conflict in looking at the workings of divine justice for the *guilty*: it is the innocent, who pose the special problem the book takes up. But not only is this problem without evident solutions, it leads to an even worse conundrum: can human beings *ever know* what the Holy One is doing? If not, how can they hope to please God? If so, *what* has happened to Job? The audience knows that the God of the folktale has already “tagged” Job as most righteous, obedient, and exemplary and has selected him for the test for this very reason. And so they are stuck, like Job, with questions about the nature of the God who is “in charge.”

The language of the Joban dialogues is one of the most brilliant examples of ancient Hebrew poetry, filled with nuance, the astonishing beauties of nature, and evidence of the superlative learning of its author. Where the folktale was gauche and somewhat plodding with its regular scene changes between Earth, Heaven, and back again, the poet takes us to the farthest reaches and depths of creation, from the times when the heavenly court celebrated the founding of the earth to the torrents of rain that can wake a dead tree.¹⁰ With Job, we search the ways of humans with each other, their land, and their God. Job’s despair at his friends’ tried-but-untrue answers to his plight forces him to look to the natural world for companionship and drives him towards God in a final confrontation that has been foreshadowed in Job’s angry challenges of chapters 9-13. Will he be able to “speak truth to power” in such a circumstance? God is no man to be confronted in court or restrained by a judge; Job suspects he would be so overwhelmed in such a meeting that he would wind up condemning himself under the awesome pressure of a god who seems more like a whirlwind than a Redeemer. In the language of lament so familiar from the psalms, Job raises his voice and his hopes, but doubts that either will do him any good. The poet’s strategy at this point is both subtle and brilliant: even captives or restorees would not have experienced the full sweep of Job’s misfortunes, but by invoking the language of the psalms of the cult through which one brought one’s troubles to God, the poet makes Job into someone with whom every person can identify, whether or not he (or she) is the greatest of the children of the east. Though Job is foreign, the poet has made of him a “hometown” hero whose personal suffering can be seen as emblematic of a whole society. Mesopotamian pessimism about the nature of the squabbling gods comes full up against the covenants of Israel: if humans are supposed to “play by the rules,” then so is God!

10. Carole R. Fontaine, “Wounded Healer on a Shaman’s Quest: Job in the Context of Folk Literature” in Leo Perdue and W. Clark Gilpin, eds., *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 70-85.

The turning point in the book occurs in chapter 31 where Job takes a ritual, cultically inspired¹¹ "oath of innocence" about his behavior prior to his afflictions. His statements cover everything from personal morality to his conduct as a landowner and religious leader. Job states in the most powerful ways possible in his culture that he is wholly innocent of any charges against him which might have resulted in this dreadful treatment at the hands of the Divine Judge. Such a magico-ritual affirmation of innocence is designed to provoke a heavenly audience, which it does: Job has made his defense so effectively that God *must* appear to refute, confound, or ratify it.

Before God's appearance, however, we find a section featuring a new character, Elihu the Buzite, in chapters 27-32. Bearing the only genuinely Hebrew name in the book—"He is my God"—Elihu is a curious addition, and scholars debate whether this unit was original to the Joban composition which linked the poetic sections to an older folktale. The Hebrew of these monologues is clearly a later form than that found elsewhere in the book, and many point out that Elihu only restates what the other friends have already said, adding nothing new on his own. Further, he is an incongruous character for the time and place of the book's origin, since young persons clearly did not have the experience to lecture the old on the nature of life and divine justice. When we add this to the clear foreshadowing in Elihu's speeches of the whirlwind about to descend upon Job, some have suggested that these speeches were added to the book later as an afterthought by some pious editor who felt that God's position needed to be restated, because the god of the Divine Speeches says precious little in answer to the questions raised by Job's complaints.

The Divine Speeches of 38-42 mirror the composition of the earlier scenes in the folktale: two speeches match the two separate divine audiences and afflictions of Job, just as the Epilogue of the folktale will give us two separate restoration scenes. While the character of God opens with a direct challenge to Job to give an account of himself for his accusations against the Creator ("Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me," 38:2-3), for some critics this is the last relevant thing that God will say. Rather than answering Job, God recedes back into the mysteries of the primal creation and the hidden, ongoing Providence which sustains all life on the planet: interesting, even beautifully profound, but hardly an answer for Job's challenge. Drawing on the encyclopedia-like "lists" (onomastica) of the wisdom of Egypt and a scribal style of catechism designed to humiliate and educate a younger colleague, God questions Job's knowledge of the principles of the world's architecture, the ways of

11. Readers may consult chapter 125 of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* for a similar piece of literature with the same function of declaring one's innocence in an incontrovertible way.

the constellations, the origin of meteorological phenomena, and the sustenance of the animal and plant worlds. The implication is that only one who knows such things should have the temerity and right to challenge God's management of human society, and Job is clearly *not* "in the know". As Job had predicted earlier, this God of Creation overwhelms him with detail, but says nothing directly to the point. Still, the angle of focus in the Divine Speeches and their response to Job *does* convey a message that goes well beyond the scribal schoolroom where abstract theological problems might be debated: by speaking of creation and *not* of humanity, the God of the whirlwind shows, through form *and* content, that humanity is *not* at the center of God's concerns, but is only a part of the whole. God's self-defense is this, then: humans who do not see the *whole* system should not judge a small part of it on piecemeal evidence. Job responds: "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer thee? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further." (40: 4-5). His answer is noncommittal and apparently none too satisfying either, since the Divine Voice feels compelled to open up another round of rebuttal.

The second set of speeches moves into portraits of larger-than-life, mythically drawn animals who defy human control or understanding: Behemoth, the hippopotamus who is lord of his river, and Leviathan, the mighty fleeing serpent or crocodile. These more unified compositions use language to describe these great, wild creatures which had been used earlier to describe Job in his "princely" roles. Unlike Job, these creatures do not challenge God even when they might have some cause—perhaps setting an implicit example God would like Job to follow. The completion of the divine menagerie gives rise to Job's second response to God:

Then Job answered the LORD:

"I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted.

'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.'

I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (RSV, 42:1-6)

Does Job really repent here, or are we being treated to yet more irony by an author who toys with his audience just as God and Satan toyed with Job? Scholars and religious authorities are divided—yet again!—on this point. Those who speak for traditional religious readings of Job's character, finding him patient and pious (even in chaps. 3-31!), tend to favor a reading which sees true repentance in Job's response. The Divine Presence is so

potent, so compelling, that Job understands himself not as a prince but as a meaningless worm, a creature condemned to grovel in the dirt before its Maker—and worms have no right of appeal. Thus, the patient Job is re-inscribed as a model of faith for suffering communities, and the ironic twists of Job's earlier predictions are muted within this interpretation.

Close readers of the text may suspect that something else is going on with respect to Job's "change of heart" in his final response to God. The possibility that Job is ironically and sarcastically giving an inauthentic response to an inauthentic God cannot be overlooked, given the author's care to have Job predict exactly this outcome. Further, of what is Job actually repenting, if that is indeed what he is doing? As late as chapter 31, he is still maintaining his relative integrity in the matter at hand; lamenting to God is no sin and is in fact recommended by Israel's religion. Even challenges to God's plans are not unheard of in the people's experience: Abraham begged for the life of the righteous of Sodom (Gen 18); Moses softened God's anger against the whining of the former slaves in the wilderness. Does Job repent of simply being human, one of the meanings of "dust and ashes" which highlights the imagery of human mortality? Or does he repent for even bothering to think that God would answer him in useful, understandable terms? Each possible interpretation can be argued with some degree of legitimacy.

In fact, it is possible to read Job's final comment, "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; *therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes,*" in a way which deviates from the standard translation, but does so simply by considering alternative meanings of the Hebrew words used. Job speaks about charges he made against a god whom he knew through theological "hearsay" and not direct experience; that situation is now changed for him, because he has finally encountered the real god who is the Sustainer of Life. The use of "therefore" in this verse is key, since it reflects a summation of events that leads to a conclusion about to be given. Job's conclusion, based on new knowledge of the Creator, should perhaps be translated as "hence, I am comforted/take comfort and recant concerning the fate of mortality." Job had claimed that creatures, human and otherwise, meant nothing to a tormenting, teasing God who abandons, tortures, and then laughs at the misfortunes of his creations. Job may not understand *what* it means to be mortal (dust and ashes, doomed to die), but God has shown him that mortality does *not* mean what Job supposed. God is deeply involved in the lives of creatures, not always visibly or unambiguously, but involved nevertheless and concerned to sustain even the smallest or most despised entity.

The author of Job puts a final touch on his reworking of the old story of righteous suffering by taking us back to the world of the folktale for the final conclusion after Job's "repentance." Now God challenges the friends, those supposed speakers of theological truth, claiming that Job's behavior

and speech were *more* accurate and acceptable than theirs: “. . .you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has”(42:7b)! In the piety of the old narrative, this statement probably referred to Job’s exceedingly passive, almost co-dependent responses of blessing God in the midst of misfortune, seen back in chapters 1-2. In its current placement, however, this statement by God vindicates the extremely non-traditional, passionate denunciations found in Job’s laments, suggesting that saying “ouch!” is indeed a proper response to suffering rather than trivializing or ignoring it as the friends and Job of the folktale would prefer to do. Sufferers have every right to question their suffering, the author seems to be telling us; the old tale breaks down in the presence of new vision, and it makes for a rather different theological response than self-abasement. Like Behemoth and Leviathan, Job is strong, powerful, worthy of a response—and he gets one, as does the reader.

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

This little book represents a marked departure from the optimistic wisdom proposed in Proverbs and the haunting questions of misfortune, struggle, and restoration found in Job. Dated usually to the end of the Persian period or the intellectually flourishing Hellenistic period, most scholars suggest a date of about 300 B.C.E. to 250 B.C.E. for the book, based on linguistic evidence. The dialect of Hebrew is quite late, and several Persian and Aramaic loan-words are also found within the text. This, added to the world-weary perspective of its author along with the notion of “fate” borrowed and modified from the classical Greco-Roman world, suggests that Solomon could not be the author as tradition has held.¹²

The association of this book with Solomonic authorship may suggest how the earliest audiences perceived the book, which is almost wholly negative in tone with only measured approval given to certain human activities. Using a “royal fiction” (1:1, 2, 12, 16; 2:7, 9; 12:8-10) works to safeguard the negative content against overt censorship. Even so—the book *does* show signs of deliberately establishing a noble birth and Solomonic wisdom credentials for the author, this literary device may be pious tampering after the fact. More traditional “glosses” sometimes attempt to counter the main author’s relentless pessimism (3:17; 7:18; 8:12-13; 11:9b), and two separate endings warn the reader not to take what is said in the book *too* seriously (12:9-11, 12-14).

Clearly, the book was written by someone who was quite familiar with

12. Murphy, 49-63; Crenshaw, 116-39; Carole R. Fontaine, “Commentary on the Book of Qoheleth,” in Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, eds., *Women’s Bible Commentary*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 153-55; Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1992).

the wisdom traditions of the earlier periods as well as the philosophical trajectories of his time. The epilogue in 12:9 dispenses with the king fiction of chapters 1-2 and confirms that our author should be understood as a teacher, a compiler of proverbs and sayings, and a philosopher. The genre of the book, known as a "royal testament," has parallels with Egyptian instruction forms in which a pharaoh wrote out his legacy of deeds and good advice for his successor; wise men of the court did the same for their younger proteges. Within the testament genre we find free use of other literary forms: proverbs, admonitions, example stories, allegory, and wisdom poems.¹³

Speaking in first-person voice, the testament naturally emphasizes the individuality and unique perceptions of the person writing the work, although it also makes use of continuity with tradition. The authority of the author derives from his successful career and commands the reader's attention. This may help us understand one of the meanings of "Ecclesiastes" ("Qoheleth" in Hebrew, a feminine noun): he is one who "collects" or "assembles." One might naturally ask, "Collects *what*?" and scholars give a variety of answers, based on the content of the personal experiences recorded in the testament. The title may refer back to the royal fiction of Solomon-the-wise-king who collected women (those thousand brides of Solomon find an echo in 7:28), just as Solomon was proverbially regarded as a collector of proverbs and songs (1 Kings 4:32).

Other suggestions include the notion that Qoheleth assembled students as well as wisdom materials in a wisdom school in Jerusalem or was a religious authority who convened congregations—this is the meaning of the name in Greek ("ekklesiastes") and Latin ("concionator"), both derived from the Hebrew word "*qahal*," assembly, congregation. Linking the name of the author to his activities also explains the word "Qoheleth"'s feminine ending: job titles, functions, and abstract concepts are feminine in Hebrew. Internal hints may suggest, however, that we would do better to dispense with the king fiction: our author repeatedly speaks of his search for wisdom, his tests of experience, and his findings (1:3-2:11 and elsewhere), which he "adds together" (that is, assembles) to come up with an answer. Even so, wisdom eludes him (7:23-25, 27-28).

The conclusion to the royal experiment of finding out "What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?" (NRSV) may be summarized with the refrain with which the book has come to be associated: "vanity." In the broader usages of the past, this term referred not so much to obsession with physical appearance (which is how moderns tend to understand the word), but to those things which are "in vain"—insubstantial, fleeting, devoid of any lasting worth. This is precisely how Qoheleth views life, and God may be the "root cause" of the problem. It is

13. Crenshaw, 128-132.

God who has made things beautiful or crooked, setting people up to strive ceaselessly, but ultimately keeping back the knowledge/wisdom needed to properly understand the world so that all die in an emotional and intellectual wilderness for which “wine, women, and song” provide no map. Here we discover an insight into the author’s social location and gender: this is a voice embedded in the male privilege of the upper classes, a voice which pretends to be powerless to change the very social orders which grant the leisure to consider such grand, disinterested tests of wisdom (2:12; 5:8)! No poor person speaks in such a way, not when survival is precarious and a rumbling belly signals that eating is about more than enjoyment. Further, most ancient women—who appear in this text only as objects symbolic of death or as the “good wife” of earlier wisdom teachings—do not speak with this royal voice of ennui and cynicism.¹⁴ The strivings of traditional wives and mothers may well be in vain, given the constraints of their societies, but they are generally in clear agreement with the priorities to which their culture has painstakingly socialized them: that their children and successors should flourish. Qoheleth is disgusted that he “can’t take it with him”; mothers are accustomed to leaving “it” all behind in service to their offspring and household. Further, the sage’s view that the stillborn child is better off than some (6:3-5) would find very little assent from the women for whom successful birthing is viewed as destiny, social fulfillment, and the path to increased status. Qoheleth’s inability to form meaningful relationships—understandable when the world and its inhabitants are all viewed as personal possessions or experimental animals (3:18-19)—may be the key to his ultimate incapacity to move beyond cynicism and skeptical recommendations to “seize the day.”¹⁵ The aloof mantle of king and sage, which he wears to organize his musings on life and his search for meaning, also forms a barrier to real touch and genuine affection. No wonder death seems preferable to enduring the continuous emotional pain of such a meaningless existence! Once old age has robbed a man of his ability to feel pleasure, Qoheleth wonders about the point of going on—beyond the fact that in death no one remembers or experiences any pleasures at all (9:3-6).

THE SONG OF SONGS

The final jewel in Wisdom’s crown is the collection of love lyrics known as the Song of Solomon or Song of Songs (the latter title is an expression of the superlative in Hebrew: like “king of kings”= “the highest king,” it

14 Eric S. Christianson, “Qoheleth the ‘Old Boy’ and Qoheleth the ‘New Man’: Misogynism, the Womb and a Paradox in Ecclesiastes,” in Brenner and Fontaine, eds., *FemCompWisdomPss*, 109-36.

15. Carole R. Fontaine, “‘Many Devices’ (Qoheleth 7.23-8.1): Qoheleth, Misogyny, and the *Malleus Maleficarum*,” in Brenner and Fontaine, eds., *FemCompWisdomPss*, 137-68.

means "the very best song"). Again, we find no consensus among scholars on date, authorship, or life-setting. A second century B.C.E. date has been proposed for the final editing of the book, but some scholars suspect that much older material, some perhaps even going back to the time of Solomon in the 10th century B.C.E., may be included in these loosely organized love poems. Once more, we find that Israel's neighbors in Egypt and Mesopotamia have similar literature though the tone may be strikingly different in places. It seems that "the fundamental things apply" in the language of love, for lovers everywhere speak of the same things: the excellence of the beloved, the search for privacy and consummation, the anguish of absence, the interference of family members who do not understand. Both the ancient synagogue and the early church were somewhat confounded by the overt, physical discussions of sexuality and affection in this text, and each chose to use those exceedingly earthly lyrics to understand the relation between the human and the divine. The Song of Songs *must* be speaking of God's husbandly love for Israel or of Christ as the Bridegroom of the church.¹⁶

In the modern era, other interpretations of the Song have been put forward. Some view it as an early cycle of poems which may have been sung and/or performed (perhaps with dancing and other ritual observances) at weddings. The presence of a (perhaps?) Solomonic love song for a foreign bride, arriving over the desert route to Jerusalem, in 3:6-11 fits into this conjectured life-setting. For others, the analogy with the Sacred Marriage Rites of Mesopotamia suggest that the Song may be a remnant, long forgotten and thoroughly disguised, of similar practices in ancient Israel. Some have seen in it the structure of a drama of a noble, rural shepherd girl torn between love for her rustic lover and the temptations of becoming the king's "favorite," all the while engaged in dialogue with the "chorus" of the Daughters of Jerusalem. None of these hypotheses wins out over the others, however, since all rely on external materials to interpret the Song. At present, most scholars seem comfortable with understanding the book as a series of disparate compositions, some originating orally, loosely held together by some central themes universally appropriate to lovers.

For all the scholarly speculation, the fact remains that this thoroughly human book has found its way into "Scripture" and stands as an affirming testimony to the goodness of the created body, its desires, and their outcome. The cluster of language about the Beloved reminds us forcibly of the

16. Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin, 1985); Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1978); Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs*; Hermenia (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 1990).

descriptions of Lady Wisdom and of the Strong Woman of Proverbs; the perseverance of the Beloved in searching for her sweetheart echoes the faithfulness of Job's wife, who stayed with him in his affliction and pursuit of an answer from God. And the motif of the search for meaning/love is strongly reminiscent of the musings of Qoheleth. These ties to language and outlook have led some scholars to suggest that it was the sages responsible for editing and passing on other wisdom books who were at work in the collection, editing, and preservation of the Song within the canon. Add to this that the Song contains no direct mention of God and deals with the everyday world of personal rather than national strivings, and the connections with the wisdom movement become even more pointed.

Other features of the Song catch the eye and call out to the modern reader. We may note with interest that the "functional" nature of sexual love—procreation—receives little or no attention in these love lyrics. Only the appearance of the Beloved's mother and her brothers suggests that sexuality leads to marriage and family life. Certainly, the beloved longs for a "legal" relationship with her lover, in which she and he might openly exchange affection, but for neither main character is the zealous pursuit of the Other primarily concerned with securing a marriage contract, children, or status. Instead, we have something very akin to modern concepts of "romantic" love: these two want each other for the sheer joy of knowing and loving; the ultimate outcome of their relationship is not a major preoccupation. We find in the Song a return to the Garden of Eden, now restored as a garden of love, in which all the snakes wear human faces, yet even they cannot hamper the lovers' joyous celebration of each other's bodies and commitments.

Scholars debate which verses throughout the poems should be assigned to the Beloved, her lover, and the other "minor" voices, but there is no debate on the subject of which voice speaks the most. It is the voice of the woman in love which directs this book. It is customary in the study of biblical literature to treat whichever character has the most lines of dialogue as the main character. Commonly, the main speaker is also held to be the character with whom the narrator identifies and whose interests the narrator supports. Just as Job outstripped his comforters by giving much longer and more impassioned answers to their shorter speeches, and just as Qoheleth tried to permit the power of speech to no other voice than his, so too the passionate songs of the Beloved overshadow those of all other speakers. This has led some to suggest the possibility of female authorship for many of the compositions in the Song. While this is not something which may be proved conclusively based on the evidence at hand, it can be convincingly argued that whether or not a woman authored the book, it is certainly concerned with and attentive to female perceptions of the world.¹⁷

17. S. D. Goitein, "The Song of Songs: A Female Composition," in Brenner, ed., *Fem-CompSong*, 58-66; Athalya Brenner, "Women Poets and Authors," *ibid.*, 86-99.

Further, there is a theological lesson to be learned here: speech about the excellence of love, the beauty of the body, the nature of desire—all these immeasurably human preoccupations are at the same time infused with a divine quality. Through true intimacy with one another, humans come to participate in an intimacy with the God who created them for love. The Song of Songs ends with this affirmation:

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire, a most vehement flame.
Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.
If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house,
it would be utterly scorned. (8:6-7, RSV)

It is no mistake that in these verses from the concluding chapter we find what might be the only genuine reference to God in the whole poem: “a most vehement flame” (“a raging flame,” NRSV) should perhaps be translated as “a flame of Yah,” where “Yah” is the short form of the name of the Hebrew god Yahweh. The metaphor is not without precedent: “x of Yah” is another way of expressing a superlative concept,¹⁸ much as English speakers might talk about a “god-awful” or “awe-ful” experience. The expansive nature of God sets the extreme perimeter on human imagination and serves here as a guidepost: when singing of love, what lovers say to one another may be viewed as truly “inspired.”