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Biblical Wisdom Literature for Preaching and Teaching

A Reader's Guide

BY ALYCE M. MCKENZIE

The self-help shelf is packed tight with appealing titles at the mall bookstore. There is a lot of talk about character, or the lack thereof, from politicians, and there is a full menu of New Age seminars from which to choose in most communities. Yet Job's question still haunts preachers and people alike. "Where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?" (Job 28:12 NRSV). Our people crave wisdom without quite being able to identify and define it. Our culture is far better at defining fortune and recognition than wisdom.

In such a cultural context, ministers, in our varied roles as teachers, preachers, leaders, evangelists, and counselors, need all the wisdom we can get! In the biblical context, wisdom (*hokmah* in Hebrew; *sophia* in Greek) refers to an order placed by God in the natural world by which we discern truth and live our lives. Within the biblical canon, wisdom literature generally refers to the books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs, of which the latter is concerned with the practical business

of steering through daily life. Two wisdom writings appear in the Apocrypha: the Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) and the Wisdom of Solomon.

After decades of neglect, biblical wisdom literature is finally receiving the attention it deserves. This is good news for ministers. We desperately need guidelines from biblical wisdom for faithful living in times of good fortune as well as bad within a theological context of a gracious, yet mysterious, God. But a scholarly explosion of articles and books, while enriching, can also be overwhelming. This reader's guide offers a map of the recent terrain. These are the books and articles I have found most helpful in my years of pastoral experience, my research into preaching wisdom literature, and my ministry of teaching seminary students, pastors, and lay people.

The wisdom literature stands out from the narrative and legal material of the Pentateuch, as well as from prophetic and apocalyptic literature. It is silent with regard to the promise to the patriarchs, the deliverance

from Egypt, the Mosaic covenant, the centrality of Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty, and the prophetic word. Wisdom literature is devoid of explicit references to God's election of Israel and other saving events. For this reason many scholars in the first several decades of the twentieth century incorrectly theorized that wisdom was the result of the Hebrew nation's disillusionment and distraction in exile. As this theory went, the theological witness was diluted as wisdom literature that focused on day-to-day survival.

In 1923 an Egyptian "Instruction of Amenemope" was discovered and published. It bore an uncanny resemblance to Prov 22:17–24:22. This opened scholars' eyes to the fact that biblical wisdom was a Hebrew version of an intercultural phenomenon shared with Egypt and Mesopotamia. In the years that followed World War II, scholars uncovered a wide range of extrabiblical connections with Ecclesiastes and Job, as well as Proverbs. They began to appreciate the theological context of biblical wisdom rather than to deny it.

Scholars began to see biblical wisdom literature as a whole, with patterns of theme and literary forms, rather than as isolated books. As wisdom's distinctive, pragmatic voice began to be heard, scholarship began to recognize wisdom elements in the Psalms, the Prophets, and elsewhere in the Old Testament.

Wisdom scholarship over the past thirty years has progressed by leaps and bounds, enriched by parallel studies in literary criticism, folklore studies, and archaeology. New insights have been unearthed regarding the social location of the sages and the literary forms of wisdom, particularly the proverb. Theologians have explored the centrality of wisdom for counseling and preaching, and the significance of personified Wisdom for contemporary christological reflection.

New Testament scholarship has moved wisdom to the center just as surely as has that of the Old Testament. For many years the consensus was that apocalyptic was primary in Jesus' message. Scholars incorrectly assumed that wisdom in the New Testament was the early church's response to the cold reality of the delay of the parousia. Recent research has revealed that the wisdom element was integral to Jesus' teachings and that the role of sage was part of his own self-identification.

Bibliographies and General Treatments

Three key articles follow the history of wisdom scholarship from the 1920s to the end of the 1980s. First, R. B. Y. Scott, "The Study of Wisdom Literature," *Interpretation* 24 (1970) traces the progress of wisdom research from the 1920s to 1970. He offers reasons for the neglect, as well as a charting of the themes and

achievements, of wisdom research over that fifty-year period. He surfaces insights that continue to inform our present-day understanding of wisdom literature. Second, Maurice Gilbert, in his introduction to *La Sagesse de l'ancien Testament*, BETL 51 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990) presents a brief summary of wisdom publications from 1979 to 1989. And last, James Crenshaw, "Wisdom Literature: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995; pp. 78–89) brings the reader up to date on the status of wisdom research in the mid-1990s.

Beyond these three articles, there are a number of works dealing with general treatments. David L. Bartlett, "The Authority of Wisdom," in *The Shape of Scriptural Authority* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983; pp. 83–111) presents a study of the authority of wisdom's insights in relation to other biblical genres and honors biblical wisdom as an experiential, yet uniquely authoritative, form of revelation. He includes an illuminating treatment of wisdom in the New Testament. James G. Williams, *Those Who Ponder Proverbs: Aphoristic Thinking and Biblical Literature* (Sheffield, England: Almond, 1981) characterizes Proverbs as a wisdom of order. Job, Ecclesiastes, and the synoptic Jesus, he believes, are wisdoms of counterorder.

James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) offers insights into the basic dynamics of wisdom literature, the differences in emphasis between the confident search for knowledge of Proverbs, the relentless demand for Divine Presence of Job, and the plaintive chasing after

meaning of Ecclesiastes. Crenshaw also deals with the Wisdom of Ben Sira, the Psalms, and the Wisdom of Solomon, as well as the influence of Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom traditions on that of the Israelites. A new edition published in 1998 updates this helpful classic.

Roland Murphy has written two introductory overviews of the wisdom literature. The first is *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981). After an introduction that deals with basic wisdom genres, the setting of wisdom literature, and the significance of extrabiblical literature of the ancient Near East, Murphy offers a treatment of individual wisdom books. A second overview by Murphy is *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (Doubleday: New York, 1990). This introduction deals with the identity of the sages and the language and literary forms of wisdom literature. Murphy includes a brief chapter on Lady Wisdom, which traces her appearance beyond Proverbs in apocryphal works. An appendix lists nonbiblical wisdom literature of the ancient Near East. Murphy depicts wisdom as a gift of God and as a human search to which God summons us.

Two essays by James Crenshaw, "Wisdom Literature: Biblical Books" and "The Wisdom Literature," provide insightful overviews. They are included in a compendium of thirty-seven of his essays published between 1969 and 1994 entitled *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions: Collected Writings on Old Testament Wisdom* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995). The former article features a bibliography of recent studies in the field of wisdom.

An article by R. E. Clements, "Wisdom and Old Testament Theology," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*, ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), is an excellent thematic overview of the latest thinking on wisdom. It covers such topics as wisdom as a comprehensive worldview, wisdom and the Hebrew canon, and wisdom's role in theology.

The Woman's Bible Commentary, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) contains entries on each of the wisdom books by contemporary biblical scholars.

Wisdom Influence in the Broader Canon

Wisdom's canonical influence extends beyond the primary texts already mentioned to several Psalms (1, 19, 33, 39, 49, 127) and various other books. The essay collection *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) contains a helpful array of treatments of the relationship of wisdom to individual prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah) and the psalms. Especially noted is the article "The Wisdom Psalms" (pp. 152–60) by R. N. Whybray. Two other related works are Donn F. Morgan, *Wisdom in the Old Testament Traditions* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) and Gerald T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct: A Study in the Sapientializing of the Old Testament*, BZAW 151 (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1980).

The Social Setting of the Sages

A question that has occupied scholars over the past few decades is,

What was the social setting of the sages? Most interpreters acknowledge an early period in which wisdom's origin and transmission occurred within family units and a later period in which wisdom was taught by teachers in private schools, with a possible intermediate stage of royal court wisdom. I suggest three writings for those interested in the social setting of the sages. The first two writings are essays: R. Norman Whybray, "The Social World of the Wisdom Writers," in *The World of Ancient Israel*, ed. R. E. Clements (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; pp. 227–50); and G. I. Davies, "Were there schools in ancient Israel?" (pp. 199–211), in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, mentioned above. The third writing, Claus Westermann, *Roots of Wisdom: The Oldest Proverbs of Israel and Other Peoples* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), argues for the prominence of the family in early wisdom instruction.

Wisdom Genres

For preaching and teaching, it is crucial to understand the various literary forms within the wisdom genre. For this we can turn to James Crenshaw's chapter, "Wisdom," in *Old Testament Form Criticism*, ed. John H. Hayes (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974; pp. 225–64). Among the forms Crenshaw defines are the proverb, the riddle, the fable, the allegory, the hymn, the prayer, the dialogue, the confession, the list, and the didactic poem.

The book by James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), examines the structure and rhetorical intentions of a number of New Testament literary forms, including aphorisms and parables.

Robert Tannehill, *The Sword of His Mouth: Forceful and Imaginative Language in Synoptic Sayings*, Semeia Supplements 1 (Missoula, Mont.: Fortress and Scholars Press, 1975) examines the rhetorical force and use of hyperbole in Jesus' aphorisms.

Several other articles explore the proverb and the parable in the teachings of Jesus and offer invaluable insights for preaching on texts from the Synoptic Gospels. Included are the following:

William A. Beardslee, "Uses of the Proverb in the Synoptic Gospels," *Interpretation* 24 (1970): 61–73.

Charles Carlston, "Proverbs, Maxims and the Historical Jesus," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980): 87–105.

John Dominic Crossan, *In Fragments: The Aphorisms of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

Bernard B. Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

James G. Williams, "Parable and Chreia: From Q to Narrative Gospel," *Semeia* 43 (1988): 85–114.

The Role of the Sage

The office of sage offers a helpful model for the pastoral ministries of preaching and teaching. Excellent historical background is available in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, 1990). This is a collection of essays that deals with the sage in Israel, surrounding cultures, rabbinic

Judaism, and Jesus' ministry. It also deals with the phenomenon of female sages in various settings. In this vein I recommend especially Claudia Camp's helpful article entitled "The Female Sage in Ancient Israel and in the Biblical Wisdom Literature."

Joseph Blekinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) contains a lengthy treatment of the role and function of the sage (pp. 9–65).

Two explorations of the piety of the sages of Proverbs, "The Contemplative Life" (pp. 250–64) and "The Restraint of Reason, The Humility of Prayer" (pp. 206–21), are found in the previously mentioned essay collection, *Urgent Advice and Probing Questions*.

Jesus as Sage

Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) sheds light on Jesus' self-understanding in relation to Wisdom. It also deals with christological reflection in Paul, the Pastoral Epistles, and Hebrews.

Bernard Brandon Scott, "Jesus as Sage: An Innovating Voice in Common Wisdom," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990; pp. 399–415) illustrates how Jesus both was indebted to and diverged from Old Testament wisdom.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus, Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1995) examines Jesus' embodiment of the tradition of personified Wisdom in Proverbs and his New Testament identification as a prophet of Sophia for contemporary reflection on the identity of Christ.

Alan P. Winton, *The Proverbs of Jesus: Issues of History and Rhetoric*, JSNTSup 35 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990) analyzes the proverbial form and, in chapter 6, deals with its use in the context of Jesus' kingdom teachings. Other relevant books and articles include Bernard Brandon Scott, *Jesus, Symbol Maker for the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); William A. Beardslee, "Uses of the Proverb in the Synoptic Gospels," *Interpretation* 24 (1970): 51–76; and William A. Beardslee, "The Wisdom Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 35 (1967): 231–40.

Personified Wisdom

Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur, Ga.: Almond, 1985) is a groundbreaking study that offers insights into how wisdom became personified as female in a patriarchal culture. Camp locates the collation of Proverbs in the postexilic period, when traditional male institutions of authority were in disrepair. The home became the locus of wisdom teaching and community stability. Images of women as subtle and courageous, but often indirect, communicators and as nurturers of hearth and home informed notions of wisdom. Camp points out how personified Wisdom is both a literary device and a religious symbol that draws these female roles to herself. *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) is a collection of essays by women. The work sheds light on the social roles of women in ancient Israel and their influence on the depiction of Wisdom's personification and precepts in both Proverbs and Job. Carole R. Fontaine's "The Social Roles of Women in the World

of Wisdom" provides a helpful introduction and overview to the volume. Several articles by contemporary women scholars deal with the images of women in wisdom literature, the role of women as counselors in ancient Israel, and the identity of the "woman of worth" of the concluding poem of the book of Proverbs.

Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *In Search of Christ-Sophia: An Inclusive Christology for Liberating Christians* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty Third Publications, 1997) focuses on the resurrected Christ-Sophia rather than on the maleness of the historical Jesus. She understands the image of Wisdom as a bridge between Old and New Testaments, between the earthly Jesus and the resurrected Christ. Clanton's work affirms a Wisdom christology intended to reclaim the inclusivity of God and Christ for men as well as women.

Preaching Wisdom

The following six articles deal with preaching wisdom themes in contemporary pulpits:

Duane Garrett, "Preaching Wisdom," in *Reclaiming the Prophetic Mantle: Preaching the Old Testament Faithfully* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 89–104.

Donald E. Gowan, "Preaching from Wisdom Literature," in *Reclaiming the Old Testament for the Christian Pulpit* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1980), 100–118. Gowan's inadequate understanding of proverbs as self-evident punch lines mars his helpful insights on general wisdom themes.

Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Preaching from the Wisdom Literature," in *Preaching from the Old Testament*

(Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 165–87.

Ronald E. Clements, "Preaching from the Wisdom Literature," in *Biblical Preaching: An Expositor's Treasury*, ed. James W. Cox (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

Kathleen M. O'Connor, "The City Square and the Home: Wisdom's World," *Journal for Preachers* 10, no. 4 (1996): 10–15.

Kent Sparks, "In the Footsteps of the Sages: Interpreting Wisdom for Preaching," *Faith and Mission* 13 (fall 1995): 70–84.

A more specialized focus on preaching specific wisdom forms is offered in three works. First, Mike Graves, *Sermon as Symphony: Preaching the Literary Forms of the New Testament* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1997) develops Bailey and Vander Broek's categories (*Literary Forms in the New Testament*, mentioned above) and makes them accessible for preachers. His chapters on aphorisms and parables are each followed by a sample sermon and a bibliography of additional sermons. Second, Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) includes a seminal chapter entitled "Preaching on Proverbs" (pp. 53–65). Long demonstrates a sermonic method by which the structure, style, and situation of

the text shape the sermon. His essay on preaching proverbs paved the way for future homiletical reflection on this neglected genre. Finally, Alyce M. McKenzie, *Preaching Proverbs: Wisdom for the Pulpit* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996) deals with the genre of proverbs throughout the entire Bible as well as contemporary cultures. McKenzie defines the structure and function of biblical and contemporary proverbs and distinguishes between proverbs of order and of subversion. There are separate chapters on the book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the sayings of the synoptic Jesus. The book concludes with six sample sermon forms, along with sample sermons. A chapter on contemporary proverbs provides the preacher with an incisive look at contemporary culture.

Wisdom beyond the Pulpit

Finally, I mention four works pertaining to wisdom beyond the pulpit:

Ronald E. Clements, *Wisdom for a Changing World: Wisdom in Old Testament Theology* (Berkeley: BIBAL Press, 1991). Clements develops a provocative study of the wisdom tradition with special emphasis on its relationship to contemporary society.

"Searching for Biblical Wisdom: Recent Studies and Their Pertinence for Contemporary Ministry," *Sewanee*

Theological Review 37 (Easter 1994): 151–62.

Robin Maas, "Wisdom Calls to Her Children: A Practicum on the Feminine Dimension in Christian Spirituality," *Church and Society* 84 (May–June 1994): 94–103.

Donald Capps, *Reframing: A New Method in Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). Capps uses the biblical notion of wisdom/ folly as a method for pastoral counselors to help people open their lives to the unexpected.

It is obvious that there is no shortage of materials that offer the pastor and preacher wisdom about wisdom. The answer to Job's question, "Where is wisdom to be found?" is, "Everywhere we look!" In theological terms, wisdom is a gift and a search, a divine initiative and a lifelong, moment-by-moment human response. One of the most exciting things about ministry is that an ever-deepening grasp of wisdom awaits us—God's, our own, and that of others. It is my hope that this description of resources for the search will assist all of us in being and becoming the sages sorely needed by our world and our church.

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