

## CENTRAL THEMES IN THE BIBLE

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### Fall 2004 Central Themes in the OT

Dec. 2	OT Wisdom Literature – The Wisdom, Word, and Power of God
	Recommended Reading: Psalms (select as you wish)
	Ecclesiastes
	Job
	Wisdom

#### The OT Wisdom Books and Books of the Prophets – the final phases of the OT revelation.

##### 1. A new understanding of the way of salvation.

8th, 7th, and 6th centuries BC: a growing understanding that God's covenant promises were not going to be fulfilled as expected by the majority of their fellow Israelites.

Beyond the Old Israel toward a New Israel and toward the coming of the universal Kingdom of God.

Not an Israel of the flesh but an Israel of the spirit is called to be God's chosen people

The promised land - not the land of Canaan but the Kingdom of God, a spiritual kingdom which stands beyond the world as then constituted and whose realization would require the radical transcendence and reconstruction of the fallen world order.

An "eschatological" transformation of the biblical message of redemption: *Eschaton* is a Greek word meaning "end," "goal," or "last thing." "Eschatology" is the theory or doctrine of last things, a conception of the final destination of the world process. This future orientation is the most striking characteristic of the wisdom literature and the writings of the prophets in the OT.

##### 2. The idea of Wisdom in the OT – two perspectives, practical and mystical.

- Wisdom as the ability to establish a practical and meaningful relationship between oneself and God, other human beings, and the world in general.

Not philosophical or intellectual wisdom but rather the practical wisdom which enables a person to live a good life both in the eyes of humanity and in the sight of God.

The OT wise men sought "to interpret for the people [of Israel] the meaning of life and human existence in the light of what the Law and Prophets had taught."

- Wisdom as a divine and metaphysical (or mystical) power, an "emanation of the glory of the Almighty," the "divine purpose by which the universe is directed."

In much of the OT, the principle of wisdom is given a personal character and is closely associated with the being of God himself.

Proverbs 8:22-36: Wisdom is personified and depicted as having been with God before the creation of the world and as being the key to eternal life.

[8:22] The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. [8:23] Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. [8:24] When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. [8:25] Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth; [8:26] before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. [8:27] When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, [8:28] when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, [8:29] when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, [8:30] then I was beside him, like a master workman; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, [8:31] rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men. [8:32] And now, my sons, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. [8:33] Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. [8:34] Happy is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. [8:35] For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD; [8:36] but he who misses me injures himself; all who hate me love death."

Wisdom of Solomon (7:22-26): Wisdom is an intelligent, holy, subtle lover of the good who is an expression of the purity, power, glory, light, and goodness of God himself.

[7:22]...[W]isdom...[is] the fashioner of all things.... In Wisdom there is a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, [7:23] beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits that are intelligent and pure and most subtle. [7:24]...[W]isdom...pervades and penetrates all things. [7:25]...[Wisdom] is a breath of the power of God..., a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty..., [7:26]...a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.

Wisdom is also referred to as the "word" by whom "all things" were made (Wis 9:1-4):

[9:1] "O God of my fathers and Lord of mercy, who hast made all things by thy word, [9:2] and by thy wisdom hast formed man, to have dominion over the creatures thou hast made, [9:3] and to rule the world in holiness and righteousness, and pronounce judgment in uprightness of soul, [9:4] give me the wisdom that sits by thy throne, and do not reject me from among thy servants.

On the basis of such OT passages, NT writers such as St. Paul, along with many fathers of the Church, regarded the OT principle of wisdom as the living Word of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, who became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 1:24-30, St. Paul speaks of Christ as the power and wisdom of God, who has made possible "our righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

In the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church, Christ is addressed as the "Wisdom, Word, and Power of God."

Overview of the Wisdom Books of the Greek OT: (1) Psalms (including Psalm 151), (2) the Prayer of Manasseh, (3) Job, (4) Proverbs, (5) Ecclesiastes, (6) the Song of Solomon, (7) the Wisdom of Solomon, and (8) the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach.

The Book of Psalms (or "Songs") has played a very great part in the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church. It is often called "the hymnbook of the second temple" because it was compiled in its present form during the days of Ezra (5th century BC) for use in the services of the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem.

Contents: hymns of praise, prayers for times of crisis, and songs of faith.

Central theme: the relationship between God and the meaning of human existence. To discover the meaning of one's own existence, one must be related intimately and harmoniously to the Lord, the ground of all being and the source of all meaning.

The Prayer of Manasseh (2d or 1<sup>st</sup> centry BC): an individual lament for personal sin, with a petition for forgiveness. Similar to the "Penitential Psalms," especially Ps 51. It differs from them in that an acknowledgment of divine justice and a confession of sin replaces the complaint about God's inaction.

Reference: the story of King Manasseh in 2 Chr 33. Because of his idolatry (vv. 2-5), the Lord brought the Assyrians against Judah, and Manasseh was taken off, a captive in chains, to Babylon (10-11). In vv. 12-13 (and in 18-19), the Chronicler states that Manasseh prayed in his distress. The Prayer of Manasseh was composed with 2 Chr 33 in mind.

Major theme: the mercy that God extends even to the worst of sinners (see the sins of Manasseh in 2 Kings 21.2-17; 2 Chr 33.2-9, 19) and the effectiveness of sincere contrition and repentance.

Three parts: an acknowledgment of God's infinite power, shown in his role as creator (vv. 1-8); a confession of sin (vv. 9-10); and a final petition for forgiveness and salvation (vv. 11-15).

The Book of Job (10th or 9th century BC): a philosophical and theological reflection upon "the problem of the righteous sufferer." Why do the righteous suffer and the unrighteous prosper in a world created by God?

The argument of the Book of Job in response to this problem is, roughly, that there is a divinely created cosmic order and pattern within which the injustices of the world will be, in the long run, turned to good. God will ultimately bring the righteous to victory and the unrighteous down to defeat. Exactly how this recompense will be wrought is not specified in the text as we have it.

The Book of Proverbs: a collection of aphorisms and poems dealing with the relationship between wisdom, righteousness, and religious devotion.

Proverbs was put into its final written form during the 3d century BC, but earlier versions of the book were in use throughout the entire postexilic era. During that period, this compendium of maxims and wise sayings was employed by rabbis in the moral and religious training of Jewish youth.

The Book of Ecclesiastes (5th century BC): the most pessimistic book in the Bible.

However, in spite of its author's deep reservations concerning the prospects and meaning of this life, Ecclesiastes leads the mind toward God as the only real source of hope and meaning. Only God can reveal to us the significance of our lives; and only in God can we realistically hope to gain deliverance from the vanities of this life and from the bondage of sin and death (see Ec 12). Ecclesiastes contains a hint of the hope for immortality (see 12:7), but this theme is not highly developed.

The Song of Solomon (written some time between the time of Solomon [10th century BC] and the 3d century BC): a long psalm dealing with the relationship between human and divine love.

This poetic tale of the true love of a man and a woman was interpreted by the fathers of the Church as an iconic depiction of the OT relationship between God and Israel, and of the New Testament relationship between Christ and his Church.

The Book of the Wisdom of Solomon (dated as late as the 1st century BC): an extended discussion of the principle of Wisdom and of the meaning of human existence.

Chapters 1-5: a prophecy of victory and immortality for the righteous and judgment and condemnation for the wicked.

Chapters 6-9: Wisdom depicted and praised as a divine-mystical principle, a manifestation of God himself.

Chapters 10-12: Wisdom's guidance of God's people from the days of Adam to the Mosaic era.

Chapter 16-19: God's love for his people.

The Book of the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus or Sirach) (2d century BC): a late expression of the wisdom tradition established in the Book of Proverbs - Wisdom interpreted as a practical understanding of God's law, which makes possible a good life under the authority of God.

## The Overall Message of the Wisdom Literature

### The reality of God

The OT wisdom literature assumes without argument the existence of God, which is considered as self-evident and thus indubitable. God is depicted as all-powerful, all-knowing, omnipresent, eternal, infinite, perfectly good, perfectly just, and perfectly merciful. God is the almighty Creator of the world, the Father of mankind, who reveals himself to man in both nature and history, especially in the history of Israel, the people of God.

### The key to human fulfillment

The wisdom literature argues that the meaningfulness and fulfillment of human existence depends upon man's relationship with God. Sin alienates man from the presence of God, whereas repentance and obedience lead to reconciliation with God. Man's sinfulness is the major obstacle to the fulfillment of human hopes and needs.

### Salvation and life beyond death

The wisdom literature also ties the theme of man's salvation to the theme of life after death (see, for example, Ws 3:1-9 and Ps 16, 17, 49 and 73). This linkage marks a new stage in the OT understanding of God's redemptive plan.

The theme of personal immortality, of hope beyond death, of the future life, is not highly developed in most of the writings of the OT. Having lost access to the eternal life of God, the ancient Israelites apparently interpreted the covenant promises of God entirely in this-worldly terms. The "promised land" was nothing more than the land of Canaan; and the happiness promised by God was nothing more than peace and contentment in this world.

However, in the wisdom literature (and in some of the writings of the prophets), there is a realization that the happiness of this life, which is ended so soon by death, is an insufficient fulfillment of the promises of God. Only if death can be defeated will true happiness be possible. This insight was made fully explicit in the New Testament and in the teachings of the Christian Church.

### The central concern of the OT wisdom literature – the problems of evil, suffering, and meaninglessness.

Human finitude and dependence set off against God's transcendence and power. The severe limitations of human understanding strongly emphasized. Humanity's radical need for God continually underlined.

The proper responses to the difficulties and pains of life: *faith, hope* and *obedience*.

*Faith* in God's ultimate justice and mercy (see the book of Job);

*Hope* for redemption from evil, suffering, meaninglessness, and death (see Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Wisdom).

*Obedience* to the law of God (Torah) – a way of avoiding evil, suffering, and meaninglessness (see Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus).

### Summary:

The wisdom books of the OT offer us a choice between meaning and meaninglessness, between hope and despair. Life may be ultimately meaningful, or it may be ultimately meaningless. Neither possibility can be objectively or scientifically verified. According to the wisdom books, we must *choose* between meaning and meaninglessness – we must decide to live either in hope or in despair.

For the OT wise men, the way of faith, hope, and obedience is the proper choice because it is a response to an historically and existentially experienced invitation from God.