

INTRODUCTION TO THE WISDOM BOOKS AND PSALMS

(Danny Hays in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*)

What Are the Wisdom Books About?

One of the most important and most basic things that the Bible tells us is to “believe!” Faith in God is a critical starting point for the Christian life, and thus we find the imperative “Believe!” everywhere throughout the Bible. Likewise, close on the heels of “Believe!” we find the constant biblical imperative of “Obey!” Other important and closely associated imperatives are “Trust!” “Love!” and “Be faithful!” The Pentateuch, the Historical Books, and the Prophets stress these crucial imperatives.

The Wisdom Books, however, stress a different set of imperatives, for the Wisdom Books tell us to “Think!” “Consider!” and “Reflect!” It is not that the Wisdom Books don’t want us to believe or obey. These things are assumed in the Wisdom Books and are viewed as foundational. Yet the focus of the Wisdom Books is to build on that foundation by exhorting the people of God to “Understand!” The Wisdom Books are not engaging in mere intellectual exercise for those who are disconnected from the real world. Far from it. The Wisdom Books challenge us with the imperatives “think,” “look,” “listen,” and “reflect” in order to build character in us. *This is perhaps the overarching purpose of the Wisdom Books—to build character in the reader/student for life in this world.* Thus “wisdom” in the Bible has a strong practical aspect. Real character in a person is only demonstrated when that person engages with the real world around him or her.

The Wisdom Books give us guidance and develop character in us so that we can live wise and godly lives in the rough-and-tumble, everyday world in which we find ourselves. The four Wisdom Books are Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. These books do not contain collections of independent universal promises, but rather valuable, yet contextual, insight into wise and godly living. They provide guidance for how to build wise and godly character into our lives. Each book has a different focus, and taken together they balance one another.

Proverbs presents the basic approach to life. It gives us the norms of life, things that are generally and normally true. For example, Proverbs teaches us that if people work hard, they will prosper. But if they are lazy, they will be poor. This is normally the case, but not necessarily universally so. Certainly not all prosperous people are hardworking, and not all poor people are lazy! Also in Proverbs life is calm, rational, and ordered. Everything makes sense and can be understood through a fairly simple system of cause and effect. But life is not always like that. Frequently it is very complex and filled with unusual situations that do not follow a simple cause-and-effect relationship.

The other three Wisdom Books interact with the exceptions and the abnormalities of life, thus balancing the



norms of Proverbs. The first big exception to the norms of Proverbs is the suffering of the righteous. The book of Job grapples with this tough topic. The second exception is seen in Ecclesiastes, which deals with the big picture of life rather than the day-to-day details, the focus of Proverbs. Ecclesiastes struggles with the observation that the rational, ordered approach doesn't always have the answer and thus doesn't provide ultimate meaning to life. Finally, Song of Songs engages with what is perhaps the biggest irrationality of life—the wild, romantic love between a husband and wife.

Where Does the Book of Psalms Fit In?

In our Bibles the book of Psalms is located with the Wisdom Books, following right after Job and preceding Proverbs. In the traditional Hebrew canon, Psalms is placed at the beginning of the "Writings" section. Thus it follows Malachi and precedes Job and the rest of the Wisdom Books. So as far as location in the Bible goes, Psalms is associated closely with the Wisdom Books. However, in regard to content and style, Psalms is very different from the Wisdom Books. Psalms is a collection of testimonies, laments, and praises that were used both in public worship and in private meditation. While most of the Bible contains God's word to us, the Psalms are somewhat unique in that they reflect the words of the psalmists as sung and spoken to God. They contain joyful praises offered up to God and testimonies to his great saving actions. They also contain cries of pain and agony over life's difficulties, followed by pleas to God for deliverance and statements of trust in God. The point here is that the Psalms are simply unique, and they do not fit in neatly with any other biblical category. Yet Psalms is located among the Wisdom Books. Thus we have included the discussion of the book of Psalms in its canonical order (after Job), but in regard to classification, we have opted to treat the book of Psalms as a separate and unique category.

