

WISDOM IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

(Tremper Longman III)

The Old Testament refers to wisdom traditions in the ancient Near East (1 Kings 4:30). Indeed, though here Solomon's wisdom is said to exceed that of Egypt and the people of the east, the compliment only makes sense if ancient Near Eastern wisdom had value.

Many ancient wisdom texts are available for study today. Egypt had a strong wisdom tradition represented by instructional texts and speculative works. In Egyptian, the instructional literature was known as *sbȳt*, which is probably best translated as "teaching" or "enlightenment." These texts are like the book of *Proverbs* and appear as early as the Old Kingdom period (about 2715–2170 BC) down to the late Egyptian period. The *sbȳt* were instructions of a father to a son. In some examples the father is the king. The father is old and experienced, about to step down from his high position in society, and his son is just starting. The best-known example is the *Instruction of Amenemope* (thought to have been composed a century before Solomon). Egyptian literature also attests a tradition of speculative wisdom literature that expresses a more pessimistic view of life, questioning the justice of this world. *The Eloquent Peasant* is a study of the exploitation of the poor by the powerful. *The Dispute over Suicide* expresses severe disappointment in this life in a manner comparable to the Teacher in *Ecclesiastes*.

Wisdom traditions also stretch back to some of the earliest writings of the Sumerians, inhabitants of Mesopotamia in the third millennium BC. Proverb collections are known from 2600–2550 BC. Besides these lists of proverbs, Sumerian literature also has an instructional text similar to *Proverbs* and the Egyptian *sbȳt* literature called the *Instructions of Shuruppak*, named after the speaker of the teaching. Shuruppak advises his son Ziusudra, the famous hero who survived the flood. While Akkadian literature (the language of second and first-millennium inhabitants of Mesopotamia, the Babylonians and Assyrians) has no significant proverb collection, it does attest a number of speculative wisdom texts. The Babylonian *Theodicy* may be the best known and is most like the book of *Job*. This text is a dialogue between two men who are friends and keep the conversation civil, but they disagree about the relationship between suffering and the gods. Finally, mention should be made of an ancient wisdom text written in Aramaic titled *Ahiqar* after its main character. The story is set in the seventh century BC and begins with the story of a wise man who was betrayed by his nephew. He escaped execution and fled into exile. After his restoration, he instructed his nephew by proverbs that constitute the large end of the text.

