

VISION FOR THE WORD OF GOD:
PROVERBS

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Forms of Knowledge

Factual, Scientific, Empirical
History
Policy
Tradition and Polity
Superstition and Folk Sayings

American/African American Folk Sayings

1. The same dog that will bring a bone will carry a bone.
2. A hit dog will holler
3. Prayer changes things.
4. If you make one step he [God, Jesus] will make two.
5. Don't never let the same snake bite you twice.
6. Fool me once, that's on you. Fool me twice, that's on me.
7. Nothing beats a failure but a try.
8. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.
9. You don't believe fat meat is greasy.
10. Beauty is skin deep, but ugly goes straight to the bone.
11. Why buy the cow when the milk is free?
12. Monkeys know what trees to climb.
13. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush
14. What's good for the goose is good for the gander
15. In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king
16. Do not do your business where you have to eat
17. God don't like ugly
18. You can't come back from where you've never been.
19. If you lie down with dogs, you will get up with fleas.
20. Monkey see, monkey do

Facts and Wisdom

Sources of wisdom:
Experience
Observation
Discernment
Revelation
The Holy Spirit

Wisdom Literature in the Scriptures
Introduction to Wisdom Literature

This book is part of the Bible called wisdom literature or poetry. It is grouped with Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. In the Hebrew Bible, it is part of the section called "Writings."

"The wise men or sages of Israel were a special class characterized by their rationalistic and calculating approach to ethics, religion and the problems of human life."¹ We would be mistaken to assume that only Israel had these sages or philosophers or religious teachers. Such persons were part of the Near Eastern culture and were present among a number of the ancient tribes, ethnic groups and races.

"Among the fundamental tenets of [wisdom literature] is the belief that the world makes sense, that underlying all the apparent confusion and injustice and disorder of daily existence is a basic pattern, an ordering by which all such phenomena can ultimately be understood...biblical wisdom texts themselves present [the] answer [that] evidence of this pattern and order does indeed present itself, if only one is sufficiently discerning and takes the "long view."²

Wisdom literature, like so much other biblical fact or truth, does not present scientific or historic truth but moral, philosophical or theological truth in the form of parable, metaphor, allegory, poetry, reflection or story. Actual places, dates, events, and persons are not important to the wisdom literature. The point is not whom did what and when they did it or did such a person actually exist or did such a thing actually occur, but what do certain actions or events or behavior reveal to us about the meaning of life, the meaning of God, human behavior, ourselves or the principles we should live by.

Wisdom literature looks for the story and meaning behind the story we read.

Book of Proverbs

Authorship

Solomon as Author

Solomon as Inheritor

Solomon as Collector

Solomon as Dispenser

Solomon is held in such high esteem in the wisdom tradition because of his prayer in II Kings 3: 3-15. Wisdom then is a gift from God. Knowledge gives us facts. Wisdom reveals what we are to do with the facts and how we are to apply them to our lives. Knowledge comes through the physical senses. Wisdom comes from the Spirit. Knowledge can be traced. Wisdom must be discerned.

Date of Composition

Although Solomon is the chief representative and spokesperson for the Wisdom Tradition, further additions probably continued to be made to Proverbs and other wisdom literature after his death. The Book of Proverbs as we now see it like so many other books probably took their present form sometimes after the Babylonian exile. Some scholars believe around the 6th century BC.

¹ Interpreters One Volume Commentary, p. 238

² Harpers Bible Commentary, pp. 398-399

Proverbs and Women

Womanist Bible scholar and theologian, the Rev. Dr. Raquel St. Clair writes: “As one reads Proverbs, it is clear that is written from a male perspective. Often advice is given to young men about wayward women but none for women regarding [wayward] men. On the negative side, women are depicted as temptresses, adulteresses and troublemakers. On the positive side, wisdom is personified as a woman. The book ends with a tribute/description of a virtuous woman.”

A Concluding Word About Knowledge and Wisdom

Knowledge and wisdom fit together like hand in glove. They are not to be pitted against one another anymore than faith is to be pitted against works, or the Old Testament is to be pitted against the New Testament. One is the fulfillment of the other. Solomon was the product of both reading and revelation, of education and enlightenment. He was the student of both the schools and the Spirit. We must strive to have the balance of Solomon.

Facts answer the What question

Wisdom tells us what to do with and how to manage the What