

Choosing the Way of Life in an Age of Freedom The Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament

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Summary

How can we communicate the Christian faith in a society where there is no moral and spiritual consensus? How can we confidently speak about the Bible when most people no longer recognize the authority of the Scriptures and the importance of the Church? How can we significantly engage our young people in a serious reflection of the Christian faith and its implications for our lives?

The wisdom literature of the Old Testament (Job, Prov., Eccles., and the Song of Solomon) can provide a fresh and needed perspective on these issues. The reason is simple: wisdom writings are intentionally designed to address an audience, which like today, faced a multiplicity of options, was somewhat cynical towards the faith, and would not accept being coerced by tradition. In this respect, the wise do not attempt to impose an opinion, but extend a dynamic and vibrant invitation to consider what gives true significance to human life from the perspective of faith.

To a generation like ours that is struggling with purpose and meaning, the wisdom books provide a wonderful model to enable Christians to present the Way of Life that can only truly be found in Jesus Christ.

I. Wisdom: What is it? What is it good for?

A. Primary Audience: Youth

- *Have the greatest potential to do good or mess up their lives.
- *Are most tempted to reject traditional values for the new and the exciting.
- *Can be very cynical of tradition and very naïve in regards to new and “trendy” ideas.

B. Range of Meaning (*hochma*)

- *A specific ability (trade)
Ex 7:11; 35:10-11,30-35; Is 44:25; 47:10
- *Intelligence, insight, shrewdness
1 Kings 4:29; Eccl 1:16-17; Job 38:36-37; Pr 30:3
- *Common sense
Prov 1:5; 2:10-11; 14:8
- *The understanding of fundamental questions (good and evil, humanity’s fate, meaning of human existence, justice, faithfulness to God, etc.)
Prov 1:1-7; 3:13-20

C. The intriguing case of Solomon

1 Kings 3:1-15; 11:1-11.14.23.25

Why did Solomon fail?

The kind of wisdom that implies faithfulness to the Lord is the highest form of wisdom. It cannot be imparted. It must be chosen. God could not give that particular kind of wisdom to Solomon, for the king had to choose to love God and be faithful to him. He chose instead to serve idols and false gods. In the end, Solomon got an F.

II. Multi-Faceted Reflections on the Secret of Success. The Book of Proverbs

Article: Pierre Gilbert, "Infinitely more than Animals," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, vol. 47 (December 2008):10-11 (<http://mbherald.com/infinitely-more-than-animals/>).

A. Confronting our Self-Delusions

B. How Will They be Persuaded?

1. The Difficulty of the Task
2. The Power of the Lure

The ultimate purpose of the wisdom teachers is to win people over. They are like fishermen. The hope is that whatever lure is used will be noticed and snatched by somebody. When that happens, they reel them in and bring them into the House of Wisdom.

C. On the Road to Success

1. The Fundamental Premise
 - a. The Importance of Having Clear Premises
 - b. The Fear of the Lord (Prov 1:1-7)
2. How to Think
 - a. The Principle of Multiple Contexts
 - b. An Exercise: Prov 10:15
3. New Furniture: A New Worldview
 - a. The basic Premise: Fear of the Lord
 - b. Affirm life.
 - c. Reject Determinism.
 - d. Bet on the 3-pound brain.
 - 1) Assets or Liabilities?
 - 2) The Atheist versus the Psalmist (Psalm 8)
 - 3) The Most Precious "Commodity" on Earth: Human Beings

III. In Search of a Unified Field Theory. A Look at Ecclesiastes

Article: Pierre Gilbert, "Fighting Fire with Fire. Divine Nihilism in Ecclesiastes," *Direction Journal*, Vol 40 (2011):65-79 (<http://www.directionjournal.org/40/1/fighting-fire-with-fire-divine-nihilism.html>).

A. Two Hints

1. Life is Like a River
2. Imagine Jack

B. Reality Check (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11)

C. Towards an Explanation

1. A Hebrew Wisdom Book
2. The Audience: The "Little Sceptics"

D. Three Types of Statements

1. Nihilistic statements

The purpose of these statements is to demonstrate that life “under the sun” is entirely and completely devoid of meaning.

2. God Statements

These are statements that seem to contradict the nihilistic statements.

3. Innocuous Wisdom Sayings

E. The Preacher’s Strategy

1. The Super Cynic Preacher: “Fight Fire with Fire.”

2. Life under the Sun: An Exercise in Deconstruction

1:1-2; 1:3-11; 1:12-18; 2:1-11; 2:12-23; 3:1-8; 3:16-22; 4:1-3; 4:4; 4:7-8; 4:13-16; 5:10-11; 5:12; 5:13-17; 6:1-12; 7:15; 8:9-10; 9:1-6; 9:11-12; 10:1; 10:5-7; 10:8-9; 12:8. **The universality of death**

3. Life under God: An Exercise in Reconstruction

2:26; 3:10-14; 5:1-7; 5:18-20; 6:1-2; 7:13-14; 7:18; 7:26; 7:29; 8:2; 8:12-17; 9:7-9; 11:5; 1:9; 12:7; 12:13-14.

A “Unified Field Theory”

4. Innocuous Wisdom Sayings

2:26; 3:10-14; 5:1-7; 5:18-20; 6:1-2; 7:13-14; 7:18; 7:26; 7:29; 8:2; 8:12-17; 9:7-9; 11:5; 1:9; 12:7; 12:13-14.

If human existence is indeed utterly absurd, how can there be here and there rays of significance? There must be an ultimate source of wisdom that is beyond and above human experience. This source is God himself.

F. The Argument in a Nutshell

Life under the sun makes no sense in and of itself. For life under the sun to make sense, it must be put into a broader perspective: Life under God. Only then, does human life and everything that is part of it begin to make sense.

G. Conclusion

1. Where Does that Leave Us?

2. Life is like a river

3. The Bottom Line

a. 11:1-6: Don’t be paralyzed by fear.

b. 11:7-10: Be joyful.

c. 2:1-8: Be faithful to God.

"I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and robbers. But the true sheep did not listen to them. Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life (John 10:7-10--NLT).

IV. The Most Surprising Book of the Bible: The Song of Solomon

[For information only. Not covered in the wisdom series.]

Article: Pierre Gilbert, “The Song of Solomon. What is it Good for?”, *InTouch* (Fall 2012):10-11 (<http://www.mbseminary.ca/InTouch>).

The Song of Solomon extols human love and sensuality. It is, in that respect, a very surprising piece of literature. Not so much because ancient Israel produced such a book, since such literature was quite common in the ancient world, but because the ancient theologians decided to include it in the canon of Scripture. The Song of Solomon contains a powerful message that is now more relevant than ever before. First, for all those who live under the oppressive shadow of the Hollywood Propaganda Machine, the book offers a devastating critique of Eros deified and its life-sucking tentacles. Second, the Song of Solomon displays a model of relationship that will prove to be a source of joy and life for young men and women who are seriously contemplating entering into the state of matrimony.

A. Introduction

1. Something to Think about
2. Preliminary Comments

B. A (very) Short History of Interpretation

1. Allegory
2. Others

C. A Contrast in Perspectives

1. Group Discussion: How is sexuality depicted today?
2. Sexuality in Modern Society
3. Sexuality in the Old Testament

D. The Argument of the Song of Solomon

1. What it is not.
2. A “Sex Manual” for Young Married?
3. A Subversive Document
 - a. Sexuality/Fertility in the ANE
 - b. Sexuality and Yahwism

E. An Alternative

F. Pastoral Observations

G. Final Words: Answers to Two Odd Questions

- What is the Greatest Aphrodisiac on earth?
- What is the Relationship between Sex and Uranium?

H. Conclusion

Human sexuality is given by God as a **gift to men and women to be celebrated** and enjoyed in the context of a **relationship** where exclusive commitment, unconditional loyalty, and the valuing of the other are prized above all.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning, the foundation, and the ultimate starting point of all true knowledge and insight into ultimate reality.

Appendix: G. K. Chesterton on Joy (*Orthodoxy*)

The mass of men have been forced to be gay about the little things, but sad about the big ones. Nevertheless (I offer my last dogma defiantly) it is not native to man to be so. Man is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial. Melancholy should be an innocent interlude, a tender and fugitive frame of mind; praise should be the permanent pulsation of the soul. Pessimism is at best an emotional half-holiday; joy is the uproarious labour by which all things live. Yet, according to the apparent estate of man as seen by the pagan or the agnostic, this primary need of human nature can never be fulfilled. Joy ought to be expansive; but for the agnostic it must be contracted, it must cling to one corner of the world. Grief ought to be a concentration; but for the agnostic its desolation is spread through an unthinkable eternity.

This is what I call being born upside down. The sceptic may truly be said to be topsy-turvy; for his feet are dancing upwards in idle ecstasies, while his brain is in the abyss. To the modern man the heavens are actually below the earth. The explanation is simple; he is standing on his head; which is a very weak pedestal to stand on. But when he has found his feet again he knows it. Christianity satisfies suddenly and perfectly man's ancestral instinct for being the right way up; satisfies it supremely in this; that by its creed joy becomes something gigantic and sadness something special and small.

The vault above us is not deaf because the universe is an idiot; the silence is not the heartless silence of an endless and aimless world. Rather the silence around us is a small and pitiful stillness like the prompt stillness in a sick-room. We are perhaps permitted tragedy as a sort of merciful comedy: because the frantic energy of divine things would knock us down like a drunken farce. We can take our own tears more lightly than we could take the tremendous levities of the angels. So we sit perhaps in a starry chamber of silence, while the laughter of the heavens is too loud for us to hear.

Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian. And as I close this chaotic volume I open again the strange small book from which all Christianity came; and I am again haunted by a kind of confirmation. The tremendous figure which fills the Gospels towers in this respect, as in every other, above all the thinkers who ever thought themselves tall. His pathos was natural, almost casual. The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears. He never concealed His tears; He showed them plainly on His open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city.

Yet He concealed something. Solemn supermen and imperial diplomatists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple, and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of Hell.

Yet He restrained something. I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His ...mirth.