

Out of Chaos: Let Our Ordered Lives Confess the Beauty of Peace

An Introduction to the Wisdom Books

Session 3: Proverbs, Baruch and Tobit

Proverbs: This book is one of three that Robert Alter, an international Hebrew scholar, says are drastically different from almost all other books in the HB. He places Proverbs, Job, and Qohelet [better known by Christians as Ecclesiastes] as most firmly fitting in the Wisdom canon.¹ Proverbs reflects collective tradition and wisdom from beginning to end, assuring the listener that by following these admonitions, one will enjoy a good life. We know that the wisdom tradition and writing was widespread in the ancient Near East, including Egypt. Its perspective is international and even universalist in scope, raising questions of value, morality, right conduct, and meaning of life. The assurance seen in Proverbs is directly countered or at least subtly subverted by other Wisdom books as we shall see. Wisdom writing continued toward the end of the biblical period, and there were also texts included in the Apocrypha and surfacing even in rabbinic literature during the early Christian era centuries.

Proverbs uses a mnemonic cadence which would allow the hearer in Hebrew to remember the sayings. Some have hypothesized that there were scribal schools and academies where students could come to learn.

This book includes some of the oldest material in the biblical wisdom books. You are all familiar with proverbs as a series of wise sayings. Proverbs often come in pairs to illustrate the alternatives. What the pair provides is an easily recognized justification being used for the situation at hand. Some of the sayings are from Israel's own sages and others are borrowed and adapted from other ancient peoples.

The identity of the Woman Wisdom in Proverbs, chapters. 1–9 and especially in 8:22–31 has been extensively debated. While some view the figure as a personification or hypostatization [incarnation] of a divine attribute, others find her origins in goddess figures within the ancient Near East or within Israel itself. [It has been] argued rather that she was an attribute of the world, signifying 'something like the "meaning" implanted by God in creation'. Certainly, she is an ambivalent and enigmatic figure. She belongs at God's

¹ Martha was blessed to attend a lecture by Professor Alter here in Orange County when his separate volume on the Wisdom books was about to be published [2009]. Since that time, his entire HB translation and commentary has been published in three volumes. This is his capstone to a life of distinguished scholarly work, most noteworthy with his attempts to capture the nuances of meaning, the style and rhythmic integrity of the original Hebrew in the English language. It is a prized possession in our household. It is available in hard copy or in Kindle on Amazon: Robert Alter (2019). **The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary**. NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

side, but she is also at home in the world (8:31–3). This ambivalence conceals her identity as much as it reveals her place as the link between heaven and earth and the mediatrix of divine revelation and divine blessing.²

Wisdom is presented as the generative force of God’s creation. Wisdom in Hebrew (*hokmah*) is a feminine noun so some scholars suggest that the world as God’s creation has as its driving force a principle of femininity that enacts and articulates the creator God. Early Hebrew lore alludes to wisdom as the impetus that urges the Creator/God into creation *in the beginning*, as the Bride calls forth the Bridegroom to their nuptial bed. (This allusive theological idea reemerges in Christian expressions as the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father). That Wisdom, as a feminine figure in the tradition, provided a resource for the later development of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Proverbs 8:22-36; 9:1-6 [New Revised Standard Version]	Proverbs 8:22-36; 9:1-6 [Robert Alter’s Translation]
The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.	The LORD created me at the outset of His way, the very first of His works of old.
Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.	In remote eons I was shaped, at the start of the first things of earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.	When there were no deeps, I was spawned, when there were no wellsprings, water sources.
Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth –	Before mountains were anchored, before hills I was spawned.
When he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world’s first bits of soil.	He had not yet made earth and open land, and the world’s first clods of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,	When He founded the heavens, I was there, when He traced a circle on the face of the deep,
When he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep,	When He propped up the skies above, when He powered the springs of the deep,
When he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command,	When He set to the sea its limit, that the waters not flout His command,

² **The New Oxford Annotated Bible**, *op. cit.*, Commentary on the Proverbs, pages 904-905.

When he marked out the foundations of the earth,

Then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways.

Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it.

Happy is the one who listens to me, watching at my gates, waiting beside my doors.

For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord.

But those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.

9 Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars.

She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table.

She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the town, 'You that are simple, turn in here!'

To those without sense she says, 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.'

When He strengthened the earth's foundations.

And I was by Him, an intimate, I was His delight day after day, playing before Him at all times, playing in the world, His earth, and my delight with humankind.

And now, sons, listen to me, happy who keeps my ways.

Listen to reproof and get wisdom, and do not cast it aside.

Happy the man who listens to me, to wait at my doors day after day, to watch the posts of my portals.

For who finds me has found life, and will be favored by the Lord.

And who offends me lays waste his life, all who hate me love death.

9 Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her pillars, seven.

She has slaughtered her meat, has mixed her wine, also laid out her table.

She has sent out her young women, calls loud from the city's heights: Whoever the dupe, let him turn aside here, let him turn aside here,

--the senseless, she said to him. Come, partake of my bread, and drink the wine I have mixed. Forsake foolishness and live, and stride on the way of discernment.

The Portrait of Wisdom: Proverbs 8 [New Revised Standard Version³

Does not Wisdom call,
 and does not understanding raise her voice?
On the heights, beside the way,
 at the crossroads she takes her stand;
By the gates at the approaches of the town,
 in the entrance of the portals she cries aloud:
To you, O people, I call,
 And my cry is to all that live.
O simple ones, learn prudence;
 Acquire intelligence, you who lack it.

“Give heed! For noble things I speak;
 honesty opens my lips.
Yes, the truth my mouth recounts,
 but wickedness my lips abhor.
All of them are plain to the man of intelligence,
 and right to those who attain knowledge.
Receive my instruction in preference to silver,
 and knowledge rather than choice gold.
For Wisdom is better than corals,
 and no choice possession can compare with her.

I, Wisdom, dwell with experience,
 and judicious knowledge I attain,
The fear of the Lord is to hate evil;
Pride, arrogance, the evil way,
 and the perverse mouth I hate.
Mine are counsel and advice;
 mine is strength; I am understanding.

.....
Those who love me I also love,
 and those who seek me find me.

.....
The Lord begot me, the firstborn of his ways
 the forerunner of his prodigies of long ago;
From of old I was poured forth,
 at the first, before the earth.

³ Michael D. Coogan, Editor (2001). **The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 3rd Edition, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books.** NY: Oxford University Press.

When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no fountains or springs of water;
Before the mountains were settled into place,
before the hills, I was brought forth;
While as yet the earth and the fields were not made,
nor the first clods of the world.

When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he marked out the vault over the face of the deep;
When he made firm the skies above,
when he fixed fast the foundations of the earth'
When he set for the sea its limit,
so that the waters should not transgress his command;
Then was I beside him as his craftsman,
and I was his delight day by day,
Playing before him all the while,
playing on the surface of his earth;
and I found delight in the sons of men.

Proverbs 9:7-12

He who corrects an arrogant man earns insult; and he who reproves a wicked man incurs opprobrium.

Reprove not an arrogant man, lest he hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.

Instruct a wise man, and he becomes still wiser; teach a just man, and he advances in learning.

The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

If you are wise, it is to your own advantage; and if you are arrogant, you alone shall bear it.

Baruch: Baruch was the well-known secretary of the prophet Jeremiah. Most likely, this short book entailed several separate compositions that have been put together. The book is very short, only six chapters long. The most important for our purposes is a section of praise of wisdom in the law of Moses: (3:9 - 5:9).

3:14: Learn where prudence is, where strength, where understanding; That you may know also where are length of days, and life, where light of the eyes, and peace.

3:16: Where are the rulers of the nations, they who lorded it over the wild beasts of the earth, and made sport of the birds of the heavens: They who heaped up the silver and the gold in which men trust; of whose possessions there was no end? They schemed anxiously for money, but there is no trace of their work; they have vanished down into the nether world, and others have risen up in their stead.

3:29-38: Who has gone up to the heavens and taken her, or brought her down from the clouds?

Who has crossed the sea and found her, bearing her away rather than choice gold?

None knows the way to her, nor has any understood her paths.

Yet he who knows all things knows her; he has probed her by his knowledge—and filled it with four-footed beasts;

He who dismisses the light, and it departs, calls it, and it obeys him trembling;

Before whom the stars at their posts shine and rejoice;

When he calls them, they answer, “Here we are!” shining with joy for their Maker.

Such is our God; no other is to be compared to him: He has traced out all the way of understanding, and has given her to Jacob, his servant, to Israel, his beloved son. Since then she has appeared on earth and moved among men.

Tobit: This book is like a religious novel, similar to the books of Jonah and Judith. The hero, Tobit, begs God to let him die after a series of misfortunes. He has a son named Tobiah. A young woman, Sarah, also prays for death because she has lost seven husbands, each killed on his wedding night by the demon Asmodeus. God hears the prayers of Tobit and Sarah and sends the angel Raphael in disguise to aid them both. There are details that may be historical and the book is usually listed among the historical OT books, but it stands halfway between historical books and the wisdom books. It was written in Aramaic and the original was lost for centuries. The Greek translation was the source for our current NAB translation. But in 1955, fragments of Tobit, both in Hebrew and Aramaic, were recovered at Qumran. It is only 14 chapters long and a real story! The angel, Raphael, brings healing and wisdom into the account.

Raphael called the two men [Tobit and Tobiah] aside privately and said to them: “Thank God! Give him the praise and the glory. Before all the living, acknowledge the many good things he has done for you, by blessing and extolling his name in song. Before all men, honor and proclaim God’s deeds, and do not be slack in praising him. A king’s secret it is prudent to keep, but the works of God are to be declared and made known. Praise them with due honor. Do good, and evil will not find its way to you. Prayer and fasting are good, but better than either is almsgiving accompanied by righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than abundance with wickedness. It is better to give alms than to store up gold; for almsgiving saves one from death and expiates every sin. Those who regularly give alms shall enjoy a full life; but those habitually guilty of sin are their own worst enemies.” (Tobit 12:6-10)

This Week's Meditation and Prayers

For Wisdom is better than corals, and no choice possession can compare with her (Proverbs 8:13).

O Beloved, help me to be guided by your Holy Spirit and to set aside choices that only distract me from your presence. Amen.

Before all the living, acknowledge the many good things he has done for you, by blessing and extolling his name in song. Before all men, honor and proclaim God's deeds, and do not be slack in praising him (Tobit 12:6).

O Beloved, may I live honorably before others, reminding them of your blessing, praising all the good things that you have done for us. May I not be slack in praising you! Amen.

Before whom the stars at their posts shine and rejoice. When he calls them, they answer, "Here we are!" shining with joy for their Maker.

Such is our God; no other is to be compared to him: He has traced out all the way of understanding, and has given her to Jacob, his servant, to Israel, his beloved son. Since then she has appeared on earth and moved among men (Baruch 3:34-38).

O Beloved, here I am! Today I shine with joy for my Maker! There is no other to be compared to you. You traced out all the ways of understanding and imparted your wisdom through your servants, Jacob and the holy ones of Israel; and you lived among us in your son, Jesus. All praise to you for his life among us. Amen.

**When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he marked out the vault over the face of the deep;
When he made firm the skies above,
when he fixed fast the foundations of the earth'
When he set for the sea its limit,
so that the waters should not transgress his command;
Then was I beside him as his craftsman,
and I was his delight day by day,
Playing before him all the while,
playing on the surface of his earth;
and I found delight in the sons of men (Proverbs 8:27-31).**

O Holy Spirit, you were with the Father when the earth and seas were established. You crafted and shaped our nature, and you delighted the Father with your play. Play with us today, smile with us, delight in us as we delight in you. Amen

**Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven columns;
She has dressed her meat, mixed her wine, yes, she has spread her table.
She has sent out her maidens; she calls from the heights over the city.
“Let who is simple turn in here; to him who lacks understand, I say,
“Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed!”
(Proverbs 9:1-5).**

*O Lord, our God, you have sent for us, called to us, and invited us to your feast.
We need not understand in order to stand in awe before your divine mysteries. We
come to your table and eat your food and drink your wine. Amen.*

