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A table of contents for *The Bible Student* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bible-student_01.php

THE WISDOM LITERATURE OF THE BIBLE*

BY F. F. BRUCE, M.A.

Introduction

The Old Testament Canon includes three books which are commonly distinguished from the others by being classed as "Wisdom Books"—because in them the value of wisdom is specially emphasized and expounded. These are the Books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The Apocryphal books also include examples of Wisdom literature, of which the outstanding two are the Book of Ecclesiasticus (or the Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sira, written in Hebrew in Palestine about 200 B.C. and translated into Greek by the author's grandson in Egypt in 132 B.C.), and the Book of Wisdom (the so-called "Wisdom of Solomon", probably written by an Alexandrian Jew about the beginning of the first century A.D.).

The practical wisdom of the ancients takes the form firstly of popular proverbs, which express in pithy terms certain observed regularities, whether in the external world or in human behaviour; e.g. "A red sky at night is the shepherd's delight" (cf. Matt. 16:2), or "There are none so deaf as those who will not hear" (cf. Ps.

* The serious Bible Student finds it essential to delve more deeply into the three Books comprising the Wisdom Literature of the O.T. than the ordinary reader who confines his attention mainly to the Pentateuch, Psalms, and some of the Prophetic books! Some more adventurous may fasten upon certain better-known phrases, sayings, or verses in the Proverbs or Job's Book, but it is not unlikely that Ecclesiastes is seldom read, far less studied. We forget, however, that there is a divine purpose and message in these Books, and more so for these days than ever before! Not only do they have some characteristic individual appeal, but *collectively as a group* they present an underlying theme expressed in the one word 'Wisdom', both the false and the true, to warn us against the one and incite us to the other. In either case the trio point us, in a variety of ways, onward and upward—directing us even though dimly to the Solution, the Coming One, Who "is made unto us Wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption", in the N.T. revelation. We are not aware of any *simple* treatise on this Literature; the latest book published some two years ago was Mr. Seton Pollock's *Stubborn Soil* which is remarkably illuminating but too philosophical perhaps to be popular. We are afresh indebted, therefore, to our esteemed contributor Mr. F. F. Bruce, Head of the Dept. of Biblical History and Literature, University of Sheffield, for so kindly consenting to give us three or four articles on the subject—to which this is the Introduction. They are not only highly instructive but we hope will encourage a closer study of the books themselves. Incidentally, we direct attention to the review of Mr. Bruce's latest book *The Dawn of Christianity*, given on page 4 of cover, in this issue.—Editor.

58:4). A more developed form than the simple proverb is the riddle or parable. Good examples in the Old Testament are Samson's riddle (Judg. 14:12 ff.) and the fables of Jotham (Judg. 9:7 ff.) and Jehoshaphat (2 Kings 14:9); the parable, of course, reaches its perfection in the Gospels.

A further stage is reached when men begin to reflect more deeply on the facts of experience, and realize that the popular generalizations are often inadequate to cover these facts. Why do the righteous suffer? Why do the wicked prosper? What is the meaning of life? Problems like these engage men's thoughts, and we find them grappling with them in such books as Job and Ecclesiastes and in those Psalms which are called the "Problem Psalms" (e.g. Ps. 73).

Wisdom, in the Old Testament sense of the word, is not simply intellectual speculation. It is practical to the last degree, with a real moral and spiritual content. "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom"; the truly wise man (Heb. *hakham*) is the man who views all life in a spirit of reverence towards God; and contrariwise the fool (Heb. *nabal*) is the man devoid of moral and religious sensibilities. "God is not in all his thoughts"; when he says in his heart, "There is no God", he is not professing himself a "freethinker" but leaving God out of life's reckoning, behaving as if there were no God.

Certain regions in Biblical antiquity were specially famed for their wisdom; thus Solomon's wisdom is said to have "excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:30; and cf. Jer. 49:7 and Obad. 8). To some extent the wisdom of the Old Testament can be paralleled in the wisdom preserved in other literatures of the ancient Orient. There is, of course, nothing surprising in this; the observed generalizations of daily experience know no racial bounds. "Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise; when he shutteth his lips, he is esteemed as prudent" (Prov. 17:28)—that is something which most people have observed, and most nations have proverbs to the same effect; one Sanskrit proverb runs: "Even a fool, when covered with fine clothes, is to that extent fair in the assembly; yea, a fool is fair so long as he utters no word".

But it is not simply in generalizations like that that we can trace parallels to Biblical Wisdom-literature. Just as most of the other literary forms of the Old Testament can be paralleled from

other ancient literature, so too Wisdom literature was not restricted to Israel. In particular, we find noteworthy similarities to Israel's Wisdom literature in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and (at a later time) Greece.

In Egypt, for example, we find Imhotep—priest, physician and architect—famed as the author of proverbs as early as the opening years of the Third Dynasty (c. 2700 B.C.), while two or three centuries later we find the maxims of Ptah-hotep constituting “the earliest formulation of right conduct to be found in any literature” (Breasted, *Dawn of Conscience*, p. 129). The downfall of the Old Kingdom (2200 B.C.) inspired other Egyptian sages with a more pessimistic view of life, as they reflected on the vanity of worldly fortune; but one of these, Ipuwer, looks beyond the present evils to the advent of a righteous king who will bring rest to men, as a shepherd to his sheep, and who is described in terms not unlike those of Psalm 72 and some other Messianic passages of the Old Testament. The closest approximation that Egypt shows to Biblical Wisdom literature, however, is found in the Sayings of Amenemope, a wise man of the Twenty-First Dynasty (1150–930 B.C.). Amenemope, significantly enough, was more or less contemporary with Solomon, and his Wisdom presents some remarkable parallels to passages in Proverbs, especially the section Prov. 22:17–23:12. But there are more ways of accounting for these parallels than by supposing that Solomon or Amenemope borrowed the one from the other.

To some of the other forms of Wisdom literature in the Bible we find closer parallels in Mesopotamian literature. The problem of the righteous sufferer, which finds classic expression in the Book of Job, was treated in several Mesopotamian works. Among these there is one, usually known from its opening words as *I will praise the Lord of wisdom*, which has sometimes been called “The Babylonian Job”, because it describes the case of a man whose fortunes were very similar to Job's, although the treatment is much inferior to that of the Hebrew book. The pessimistic strain in Ecclesiastes, again, seems to echo passages from the Gilgamesh epic, and from a work called the *Dialogue of Pessimism*, in which a Babylonian master and his slave conclude that no values exist—in short, that all is vanity.

Of course, such pessimism is not restricted to any one age or country; and some of the most striking parallels to Ecclesiastes

are to be found in the writings of Greek thinkers like Theognis (c. 500 B.C.). Many of these parallels have been collected by Dr. Harry Ranston in *Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom Literature* (1925), but here again we should not be too hasty in assuming that the very considerable similarity in thought and expression implies direct literary dependence either way. Like causes produce like effects all over the world.

"The Wisdom Literature of both Egypt and Mesopotamia", writes Sir Frederic Kenyon, "goes back to much earlier periods than the corresponding Hebrew books. The Hebrew writers were engaging in a kind of literature common to Eastern countries, and were no doubt influenced by the productions current in the countries to east and west of them; but their writings are not direct copies. They are original compositions in the same vein, and in their best portions, such as the praise of Wisdom as the mouthpiece of God, they reach a higher plane of thought and of emotional expression than their neighbours and predecessors" (*The Reading of the Bible*, p. 52).

In spite of all the similarities, the Hebrew Wisdom literature bears unmistakable features which distinguish it from the Wisdom literature of other nations. These distinctive features belong to the unique revelatory character of Hebrew religion, with its emphasis on the one living and true God. Wisdom in the Bible is *Divine Wisdom*. Not only do these inspired men grapple with the problems of life; as they do so, God makes Himself and His ways known to them and through them.

The concept of Divine Wisdom played no small part in preparing the way for the coming of Christ. Behind the doctrine of the Divine Word in the opening section of John's Gospel, for example, we can see the personified Wisdom of Old Testament times, and especially the famous passage in Prov. 8:22 ff., where Wisdom is represented as God's assessor at the creation of the world. In this and other ways the Wisdom movement led on to the advent of Him "who of God is made unto us wisdom". The Wisdom books of the Old Testament, when illuminated by the Incarnation and viewed accordingly in the light of their fulfilment, are seen to introduce the Personal Wisdom of God and thus to set the stage for Him who declared, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life"—the final solution to the problems of man and the world.

(To be continued)