

## Wisdom Literature

Wisdom is such a broad notion that it might be helpful to make some distinctions. Authorities talk about wisdom literature, wisdom thinking, and the wisdom tradition. The category *wisdom literature* is a literary designation. It is not a native Hebrew category, as far as we can tell, but only a scholar's category to define a large body of literature that is present not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in the literature of Egypt and Mesopotamia. The wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible is generally considered to be Proverbs and Job (see [Chapter 15](#)), Ecclesiastes (see [Chapter 16.4](#)), and the wisdom psalms (see [Chapter 14](#)). If we include deuterocanonical books, the [Wisdom of Solomon](#) and [Sirach](#) (short for the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, also called Ecclesiasticus ) would be added.

	B.C.E.	Writings
Babylonian Empire:		
Destruction of Jerusalem	587	Lamentations
		Job (?)
Persian Empire:		
Restoration of Judah	539	
Second Temple	515	
	400	Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles
		Psalms
		Proverbs
		Ruth
Greek Empire:	333	
		Ecclesiastes
		Song of Songs (?)
		Esther
Maccabean Revolt	167	Daniel

Wisdom literature rests on a basic belief in the goodness of God's created order. This is one of its premises that gets it into certain theological binds, especially with the issue called *theodicy*. Literally, theodicy means "the justice of God" and is a label applied to the problem of reconciling the belief that God is a good god who controls the world he created with the facts of suffering and injustice in the natural world. In Israel's case, the issue of theodicy was occasioned most pointedly by the conflict between the Torah-Prophets worldview of a God-given order and the plight of the postexilic community, which suffered at the hands of unrighteous pagans. This issue is perhaps behind the theological discussion carried on in the book of Job.

## ***Psalm Types and Speech Forms***

An **invocation** gets God's attention. It usually presupposes a problem the psalmist needs solved. (5:2)

**Complaint** language, also called **lament**, describes the psalmist's or the community's difficulty and often expresses feelings of abandonment. The language is narrative in form rather than imperative.

A **petition** calls upon God to do something, perhaps intervene and give aid, or forgive. Petition usually contains an imperative (and an exclamation point).

**Praise** language announces the greatness of God. A **call to praise** enlists fellow worshipers in acclaiming the wonders of God.

A **vow of praise** promises to credit God with the yet-to-be experienced deliverance.

### **Complaint**

The largest number of psalms in the Psalter fall under the heading **lament**. Perhaps the term **complaint** communicates more immediately what this type of psalm expresses. The heart of a complaint psalm is a description of the suffering of the psalmist and a plea for deliverance. Psalm 22 is a well-formed representative of the individual complaint psalm type, especially notable within the Christian community because it was quoted by Jesus of Nazareth as he was being crucified.

### **Thanksgiving**

The psalm of **thanksgiving** is the flip-side of the psalm of complaint. Thanksgiving psalms are expressions of gratitude. Whereas the psalm of complaint anticipated God's deliverance, the psalm of thanksgiving was written after deliverance had been experienced. In it the psalmist thanks God for salvation.

### **Hymn**

A **hymn** is a song in praise of God or in praise of something about God. It contains generalized praise language. It is not so much praise for what God has done to save (as in psalms of thanksgiving), as praise for who God is. A *creation hymn* finds reason to praise God for the wonder and magnificence of the natural world. Among creation hymns, Psalm 19 is notable for the way it joins the revelation of God's glory through creation with the revelation of God's will through Torah. A *hymn of Yahweh's kingship* celebrates the rule of Yahweh. Included in this category are: 47, 93, and 96-99. Some of these psalms begin with the shout "Yahweh is king!" alternately translated, "Yahweh reigns. Psalm 93 is typical of this category. The threat to Yahweh's power is the primeval waters. Compare the mythological background to the Priestly story of creation (see Chapter 1). Yahweh triumphed at creation over the waters of chaos and demonstrated thereby his supremacy.

A hymn to Israel's king, sometimes called a *royal psalm*, praises Israel's earthly king as the representatives of God.

B.C.E.	Period	Context	Sub-category	Psalms
950-587	First Temple	Davidic monarchy	Royal psalms	<a href="#">2</a> , <a href="#">18</a> , <a href="#">20</a> , <a href="#">21</a> , <a href="#">45</a> , <a href="#">72</a> , <a href="#">89</a> , <a href="#">89</a> , <a href="#">132</a> , <a href="#">144</a>
		Solomonic temple	Songs of Zion	<a href="#">46</a> , <a href="#">48</a> , <a href="#">76</a> , <a href="#">87</a> , <a href="#">122</a>
			Liturgies	<a href="#">15</a> , <a href="#">24</a>
			Borrowed Canaanite hymns	<a href="#">29</a> , <a href="#">68</a>
		Nation and land	Community psalms	<a href="#">65</a> , <a href="#">66</a> , <a href="#">67</a> , <a href="#">118</a>
			Individual psalms	<a href="#">7</a> , <a href="#">12</a> , <a href="#">23</a> , <a href="#">30</a> , <a href="#">40</a> , <a href="#">41</a> , <a href="#">51</a> , <a href="#">61</a> , <a href="#">140</a> , <a href="#">141</a>
		Psalms with prophetic oracles		<a href="#">50</a> , <a href="#">75</a> , <a href="#">81</a> , <a href="#">82</a> , <a href="#">95</a>
587-520	Babylonian Exile	No monarchy	Yahweh's kingship	<a href="#">47</a> , <a href="#">93-99</a>
			Creation hymns	<a href="#">19A</a> , <a href="#">104</a>
		No temple	Zion laments	<a href="#">74</a> , <a href="#">77</a> , <a href="#">79</a> , <a href="#">137</a>
		No nation	Community laments	<a href="#">44</a> , <a href="#">60</a> , <a href="#">123</a> , <a href="#">126</a>
			Individual laments	<a href="#">13</a> , <a href="#">17</a> , <a href="#">22</a> , <a href="#">31</a> , <a href="#">35</a> , <a href="#">42-43</a> , <a href="#">54</a> , <a href="#">55</a> , etc.
		Prophetic	Salvation history	<a href="#">78</a> , <a href="#">105</a> , <a href="#">107</a>
520-323 ?	Second Temple	Theocracy, adaptation of royal and divine kingship psalms		
		Second temple	Individual temple songs	<a href="#">25</a> , <a href="#">84</a> , <a href="#">116</a> , <a href="#">138</a>
			Hymns of praise	<a href="#">8</a> , <a href="#">33</a> , <a href="#">100</a> , <a href="#">103</a> , <a href="#">117</a> , <a href="#">135</a> , <a href="#">136</a> , <a href="#">145-150</a>
		Decline of prophecy	Wisdom psalms	<a href="#">1</a> , <a href="#">36</a> , <a href="#">37</a> , <a href="#">49</a> , <a href="#">73</a> , <a href="#">111</a> , <a href="#">112</a> , <a href="#">127</a> , <a href="#">128</a> , <a href="#">129</a>
			Torah psalms	<a href="#">1</a> , <a href="#">19B</a> , <a href="#">119</a>

## Proverbs

Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*, with sayings such as "a penny saved is a penny earned," is an American cultural artifact. A **proverb**, much like a Ben Franklin maxim, is a short, memorable saying that encapsulates a truth about life. Proverbs are typically framed as matter of fact statements of the way things are. But really they are lessons about the way you should be.

### Proverbs from Around the World

#### *Sumerian proverb*

Into an open mouth a fly will enter.

#### *Arabic proverbs*

The camel never sees its own hump, but that of its brothers is always before its eyes.

Three things cannot hide themselves: love, a mountain, and a man on a camel.

A scholar is mightier than the knight.

#### *Japanese proverb*

Even monkeys fall from trees.

#### *Chinese fortune cookie proverbs from a Holland, Michigan restaurant*

Every excess becomes a vice.

Genius does what it must, and talent does what it can.

#### *Native American proverb*

There is nothing so eloquent as a rattlesnake's tail.

## Outline

- I. Prologue ([1-9](#))
  - A. Purpose and Theme ([1:1-7](#))
  - B. Superiority of Wisdom over Folly ([1:8-9:18](#))
- II. Proverb Collections ([10-31](#))
  - A. Proverbs of Solomon ([10:1-22:16](#))
  - B. Thirty Sayings of the Wise ([22:17-24:22](#))
  - C. Additional Sayings of the Wise ([24:23-34](#))
  - D. Hezekiah's Collection of Solomon's Proverbs ([25-29](#))
  - E. Words of Agur ([30](#))
  - F. Words of Lemuel ([31:1-9](#))
  - G. The Ideal Wife ([31:10-31](#))

### Wisdom and folly--

Wisdom is a fountain of life to him who has it,  
but folly is the chastisement of fools. ([16:22](#))

### The righteous and the wicked--

The righteous will never be removed,  
but the wicked will not dwell in the land.  
([10:30](#))

### Rich and poor--

A rich man's wealth is his strong city,  
the poverty of the poor is their ruin. ([10:15](#))

### Industry and laziness--

A slack hand causes poverty,  
but the hand of the diligent makes rich. ([10:4](#))

### Humility and pride--

When pride comes, then comes disgrace,  
but with the humble is wisdom. ([11:2](#))

<b>Wisdom and Folly</b>	10:8, 13-14, 23, 12:1, 15-16, 23; 13:14-16, 20; 14:1, 3, 7-8, 15-18, 24, 33; 15:5, 7, 14, 20-21; 16:16, 21-23; 17:10, 12, 16, 24, 28; 18:2, 6-7, 15, 19:25, 29, 21:22; 22:3, 23:9; 24:3-7, 13-14; 26:1, 3-12; 27:12, 22; 28:26; 29:8-9, 11
<b>Righteous and Wicked</b>	10:3, 6-7, 11, 20-21, 24-25, 27-32; 11:3-11, 17-21, 23, 28, 30-31; 12:2-3, 5-7, 10, 12-13, 21, 26, 28; 13:5-6, 9, 21-22, 25; 14:9, 11, 14, 19, 32; 15:6, 8-9, 26, 28-29; 16:8, 12-13; 17:13, 15; 18:5; 20:7; 21:3, 7-8, 10, 12, 18, 26-27; 24:15-16; 25:26; 28:1, 12, 28; 29:2, 6-7, 16, 27
<b>Power of Words and Speech</b>	10:18-21, 31-32; 11:9, 11-14; 12:6, 14, 17-19, 22; 13:2-3; 14:5, 25; 15:1-2, 4, 23; 16:1, 23-24, 27-28; 17:4, 7, 27; 18:4, 6, 13, 20-21; 19:5, 9; 20:19; 21:6, 23; 22:10; 25:11, 15, 23, 27; 26:20-28; 27:2; 28:23; 29:20
<b>Family</b>	10:1; 13:1, 24; 17:21, 25; 19:13, 18, 27; 20:11; 22:6, 15; 23:13-16, 19-28; 28:7, 24; 29:15, 17; 30:11, 17
<b>Hard Work and Laziness</b>	10:4-5, 26; 12:11, 24, 27; 13:4; 14:23; 15:19; 18:9; 19:15, 24; 20:4, 13; 21:25; 22:13; 24:30-34; 26:13-16; 28:19
<b>Wealth and Poverty</b>	10:15; 11:4, 24-25; 13:7-8, 11; 14:20-21, 31; 18:11, 23; 19:4, 7, 17; 21:13, 17; 22:1-2, 7, 16, 22-23; 23:4-5; 28:3, 6, 11, 20, 22; 30:8-9

## **Ecclesiastes**

Ecclesiastes is usually included in the category of wisdom literature along with Proverbs and Job. The style of its language, its vocabulary, and themes it holds in common with Greek philosophy suggest that it dates to the second century B.C.E.

- I. Prologue (1:1-11)
  - A. Theme (1:1-3)
  - B. Cycle of Life (1:4-11)
- II. Life Experiment (1:12-2:26)
- III. A Time for Everything (3:1-9)
- IV. Disappointments of Life (3:10-4:16)
- V. The Counsels of Wisdom (5:1-12:8)
- VI. Epilogue (12:9-14)

Like Job, it presents a challenge to traditional theology. The book of Ecclesiastes questions the purpose of human existence. It asks, What gives lasting meaning to life? If everyone only dies in the end, what is the meaningful difference between righteousness and wickedness? The seriousness with which the book probes this basic human issue makes it one of the most accessible, almost even "modern," pieces of biblical literature.

Everything is emptiness and a chasing after wind.  
There is nothing to be gained under the sun. (2:11)

## **Job**

The later books of wisdom literature display a growing theological sophistication. They recognize that easy answers will not suffice. The book of Job is a frontal assault on the glib retribution categories of traditional wisdom, as represented by the book of Proverbs and the Deuteronomic tradition.

### **Outline of Job**

- I. Narrative Prologue: Job's tragedy ([1-2](#))
- II. Job's Lament ([3](#))
- III. Three Dialogue Cycles([4-28](#))
- IV. Job's Final Discourse ([29-31](#))
- V. Elihu's Speeches ([32-37](#))
- VI. Theophany ([38-41](#))
- VII. Narrative Epilogue: Job's reversal ([42](#))

The basic story line is straightforward. Job was a morally upstanding individual. He had considerable wealth and a fine family. When the divine council met in heaven God expressed his pride in Job, but he was challenged by one called *the adversary*, otherwise known as **the satan**. Note that "the satan" does not have a capital *s* because it is not a name but a title, indicated by the definite article *the*, *ha* in Hebrew. The satan figure of the book of Job is a member of the divine council, and is not the devil of later Judaism and Christianity. Satan means adversary or accuser, and this may have been an official function within the council. The term *satan* used in reference to an individual is found in only three settings in the O.T. . Here in Job, in [Zechariah 3:1-2](#) (also with the definite article), and in [1 Chronicles 21:1](#) (without the definite article).

One way to get at the meat of the book is to survey the positions of the main players.

### **Eliphaz**

He observes that no one is ever completely sinless. In no uncertain terms he upholds the theology of retribution. Eliphaz then goes on to say that everyone can expect at least a little suffering in life. Job is relatively innocent, so he will not suffer permanently. He should be patient; his suffering will soon be over.

### **Bildad**

He applies the theology of retribution relentlessly. He claims that Job's children must have been notable sinners to be treated so brutally by God. No doubt they died justifiably. Since Job is still alive, claims Bildad, he must not be too bad a sinner.

### **Zophar**

He claims that Job must be suffering for his own sin. Even though Job will not admit it publicly, he must be a sinner. Job should honestly face his sin and ask God for mercy.

### **Elihu**

Elihu speaks ([32-37](#)) after Job's other three friends have had their say. He says that suffering is the way God communicates with human beings. It is the way God reveals that we are sinners and that he considers sin a serious offense.

## **Job**

Job has no coherent response to his calamity. He argues with his friends and attacks their counter arguments. But ultimately he remains confounded. He just does not know how to handle his predicament. He never gives in and admits personal guilt in the measure that would call forth such suffering. He often urges God to reveal himself and state why he is afflicting him so. He challenges God in what amounts to a lawsuit, much in the manner of the covenant lawsuit popular with the prophets, even though he recognizes that if God actually appears he would be powerless to respond. This sentiment is amazingly prescient of what would soon happen.

## **Yahweh**

Yahweh does not respond to the intellectual arguments of Job and his friends, all of which had to do in some way with the theology of retribution. He quite ignores that business, neither affirming retribution nor denying it. He appeared in a storm theophany (38-41), but instead of answering Job's questions, he put Job on trial.

God launches into a second discourse designed further to impress Job with his omnipotence. He describes in great detail his creation and the harnessing of Behemoth and Leviathan. Through the whole encounter God is absolutely overpowering.

The narrative conclusion of the book seems especially artificial and unsatisfying to many readers-- though, perhaps, not for retribution theologians. In the end, Job's fortunes were restored. He was given sons and daughters to replace those he lost, and his former material wealth was doubled. Although Job was reduced to humble acceptance of the power of God, he was vindicated and was told to pray for his three friends who were in the wrong.