

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Adult Education

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN CHRISTIAN BELIEF

12 April—17 May 2015

Session 3

Last week we continued our study of the Old Testament in Christian belief by considering the following:

- Who were the prophets?
- What is prophecy?
- What are the two dominant themes in all prophecy?

This week we continue our study with a survey of Wisdom Literature, apocalyptic, and narrative.

The Theology of “the Writings”: Narrative, Wisdom Literature, and Apocalyptic

The third type of literature found in the Old Testament consists of the “Writings.” This broad classification includes those books of narrative history often referred to as the “Former Prophets” (Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings), and the broad genre of “Wisdom Literature.” Wisdom literature includes both books such as Psalms, Proverbs, and Job, together with many writings that are parts of the Apocrypha in Protestant bibles, together with Daniel, which—while part of the Writings—is *sui generis* as an example of a type of writing known as “Apocalyptic”.

The traditional tripartite division of the Old Testament ignores the very different characters and purposes of writings in the Wisdom Literature tradition and those which are narratives (*e.g.*, 1 & 2 Chronicles). For purposes of this introduction, therefore, we will consider narrative literature together with the Former Prophets, for there are perhaps greater parallels within this grouping than within the broader classification of the Writings.

1) *The Former Prophets and Narrative Literature*: Books included as Former Prophets include: Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings. In Catholic bibles following the Septuagint text tradition, 1 & 2 Samuel are known as “1 & 2 Kings,” and 1 & 2 Kings are known as “3 & 4 Kings”. Books included as narrative literature include: 1 & Chronicles, Ruth, Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

a) The Former Prophets: The concept of one people in covenant with and under the rule of the LORD predominates.

i) Thus, in Joshua the people enter the promised land under one strong leader. Joshua (the book) ends with the death of this leader (Joshua), and Judges then begins “after the death of Joshua.”

(1) The time frame for this transition is not specified, but Judges refers to the people not as “Israel,” but as “the children of Israel.”

(2) Judges is told in a disjointed fashion, reflecting the fact that the people are fractured into competing tribes.

- (3) There is no one leader, and this absence of a unifying leader is portrayed as an evil, leading to great iniquities among the people.
 - ii) In 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings we witness the rise of the unified Jewish monarchy. Despite struggles and personal failings in monarchs, the Jewish golden age arises under David and Solomon, with the building of the Temple.
 - (1) The Lord is truly in His people's midst, and the people are united in the worship of the Lord, all under one king.
 - (a) The wickedness and failings of individual monarchs are portrayed as failure to serve the Lord.
 - (2) A common theme is the need to rely wholly on the Lord for protection.
 - (a) In addition to Samuel, Elijah and Elisha are prominent as prophets who say little but do much.
 - (i) Their actions portray the message of the greatness of the Lord, and His paramount position above all other gods.
 - b) Narrative Literature: Common to both the historical books of the Former Prophets and to the later narrative literature, the object of biblical witness is not to record history *per se*, but to bear testimony to the working out of the prophetic word in the life of the nation. This same is true of those books (*e.g.*, Esther and Ruth) which are not so much history as moral stories. The word of God is lived rather than spoken.
 - c) Daniel: Daniel must be considered within the context in which it was written and received among Jews of the post-Maccabean period (2nd century, B.C., *i.e.*, more than three centuries after the events related in the book).
 - i) Daniel is written in two different languages: Hebrew and Aramaic.
 - ii) Daniel can be seen to be comprised of "court stories" (chs. 1-6) and apocalyptic visions (chs. 7-12).
 - iii) Daniel does not address his hearers as would a prophet, but interprets dreams and visions.
 - iv) The genre of apocalyptic literature (visions of the end of the world) dominate in times of persecution (*e.g.*, after the revolt of the Maccabees): that God will vindicate the righteous.
- 2) Wisdom Literature: This is a broad genre reflecting a style of writing common in the ancient Near East.
- a) Books included as Wisdom Literature include many books placed in the Apocrypha in Protestant bibles, and includes both books written in Hebrew and in Greek (*e.g.*, Sirach, or the Wisdom of Solomon [sometimes called "Baruch"], and Wisdom).
 - i) The best-known books in this tradition include Psalms and Proverbs, together with Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon (the "Song of Songs").
 - ii) The remainder of the Wisdom books are all in the Apocrypha in Protestant bibles, and range from Tobit (a sort of sapiential short story concerned with the morality of everyday living) to tales of heroism told to make a moral point (*e.g.*, Susanna).
 - b) Thematic content: These books say almost nothing about the history of Israel, but are concerned with right living: How the just and wise man is to live. Righteousness is not linked to observance of the Law, but to enlightenment.
 - i) The books are strongly didactic in nature, making a point of saying that they teach.

- ii) They are concerned both with practical living and with going beyond practical living, to teach the nature of wisdom itself, and the relationship of wisdom to the Lord.
 - iii) “Wisdom” is often personified (in Greek as *Hagia Sophia*, “Holy Wisdom”) using the feminine pronoun.
- c) It is very possible that the Wisdom books and Deuteronomy were written by the same class of scribes (*ca.* the 8th and 7th centuries, B.C.) Much vocabulary is similar, and wisdom is reckoned in Deuteronomy to be obedience to the LORD (4.5-8; 32.6, 21, 28-31).
- i) “Wisdom” thinking was probably in the mainstream of biblical thought, and it is thus not surprising that wisdom elements are not uncommon in many books of the Bible. Common themes include:
 - (1) *Cosmic order*: There is a divinely ordained order in the natural world. Human beings are part of nature, and not separate from it.
 - (2) *Creation*: The LORD is the author of all creation, determining boundaries and setting forever that His works do not disobey the divine word. Human beings, however, have free choice. We are called to obedience, and the path of wisdom lies in obedience.
 - (3) *Wisdom*: The rules or laws which are part of the structure of the world can be discovered through wisdom. These norms can be expressed and taught to others. Wisdom is practical, involving knowledge of how the world works. Human wisdom has limits (Prov. 26.4-5, “Do not answer fools according to their folly ...”). Wisdom is both a human task and a divine gift, and is an object of constant reflection.
 - (4) *Human choice has consequences*: All actions have consequences, leading to the doctrine of “Two Ways”.
 - (5) *Two Ways*: Life presents two paths, each with an intrinsic dynamism. The contrast may be explicit (as between Wisdom and Folly, in Prov. 4.10-19). Psalm 1 is also an example. One way of living is blessed and the other cursed, but these ways of living are not static.
 - (6) *The Problem of Evil*: A skeptical thread runs through wisdom literature. Nonetheless, no separate power of evil is recognized. God is the source of all creation. Wisdom literature recognizes that one may be righteous and yet suffer (*e.g.*, Job).
 - (7) *Personification of Wisdom*: Wisdom is personified as a woman. Nonetheless, she is never confused with being a goddess. Her qualities may be enumerated (Wis. 7.22-23), but as those of a *creature* of the LORD. As a person, she bears the hallmarks of metaphor.