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Q&A#31 How Does Proverbs Fit in With the Rest of the OT?

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Today's question: "How does the book of Proverbs fit in with the rest of the OT? It seems so general and universal, and hardly draws upon Israel's particular covenant history. It rarely if at all appeals to special revelation from YHWH, the God of Israel, and discusses natural realities that are universally acknowledged. Is there much of a difference between Proverbs and the sort of wisdom literature that pagans would write?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today I'm going to answer the following question. How does the book of Proverbs fit in with the rest of the Old Testament? It seems so general and universal and hardly draws upon Israel's particular covenant history.

It rarely, if at all, appeals to special revelation from Yahweh, the God of Israel, and discusses natural realities that are universally acknowledged. Is there much of a difference between Proverbs and the sort of wisdom literature that pagans would write? At the outset, we should be very clear that the God of Israel, the covenant God, Yahweh, is the God of the whole earth. He's the God of creation.

He's the God who has established the natural realities that are supposedly universally acknowledged. And so, at the very beginning, this idea that there should be a sharp disjuncture between the sort of literature that addresses the very peculiar covenant relationship that God has with Israel and the more broad revelation that God has given of

himself within the natural order, there need be no such breach. Rather, what we see in scripture, I think, is a movement towards Israel's greater apprehension of that natural order.

And so they are given the law in part to orient them well towards the natural order. And so, as they develop in their knowledge of the law, if they develop in the teaching of the law, they will come to an understanding of wisdom. And that wisdom will give them a grounding within the natural pattern of things.

Because the law is designed around God's natural ordering of the world. If we see the law just as some commandment that's imposed upon reality that has no fitting, that's not in keeping or that's not matched up with the reality of the world that God has created, we'll be misunderstanding it. Rather, the law orients us towards reality.

And the more that we understand the law, the more that we'll understand the reality that it relates to. Likewise, when we read the book of Proverbs, we're reading something that arises in large part out of reflection upon and training within the law. This is a book addressed to someone who has learnt from the teaching of his father and mother, learnt from the commandment, and now comes to reality and is able to see and understand it in a new way.

And so there should not be this sharp disjunction between the two. Law and wisdom, the relationship between the two of them, is important. If we go back to Deuteronomy, chapter 4, a passage that I discussed with Peter Lighthouse recently on the podcast, we read, Israel's instructed to listen to the statutes and judgments and to observe them so that they might live.

And then later on it says, Surely I have taught you these statutes and judgments, just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them, for this is your wisdom and your understanding and the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the Lord our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day? Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life, and teach them to your children and your grandchildren, etc.

And the point of the law there, in part, is to develop the people of God in wisdom. And that wisdom will have an evangelistic purpose. People will look from all around and they will recognise that there's something about these people that they understand reality in a very powerful way.

And so the law is not unrelated to wisdom. The law leads to wisdom. As you are trained by the law, you're trained into reality.

Now, that disjuncture between the law and wisdom, as if you have natural reality here and then you have this body of commandment that is unrelated to the natural order, that's a misapprehension of what God is actually doing in giving the law. Rather, God has given them a deeper understanding of reality. And then that is something that will enable them to reflect upon reality better, to grow in wisdom, and then to be a people that set an example for those roundabout who will recognise that this is the sort of wisdom that they are after.

This is the sort of wisdom, the quest for wisdom that they are engaged in, is a quest for wisdom that Israel is advanced in, precisely because they have heeded the law. Now, as Christians, this is something that we should exemplify as well. As we are people who reflect upon God's law and God's word, and as we are trained within that, we should be those who go out into the world and people should remark upon our wisdom and our insight and our ability to understand reality and to speak prudently and with discernment about its issues.

And also to live in a way that's fitting to reality, that yields good fruit. The problem is that if you treat wisdom literature as something that's detached from the law, you'll miss that important connection. You'll miss the way that law, as we are developed within it, as we practice it, will lead to wisdom.

A further thing to recognise is that the name of Yahweh is repeated throughout this book. This book is a book that relates to Yahweh. It treats Yahweh as the creator of the world, the one who has established these natural orders.

All of these things begin with the fear of Yahweh. That is what orients you to reality properly. If you are not seeking Yahweh, if you're not living in a way governed by the fear of him, you will be disoriented.

You will be wrongly related to reality and you'll struggle to understand it properly. And there's a number of reasons for this. One of the reasons is not least the fact that corresponding to the fear of Yahweh is humility.

It is a recognition of your own limitations, a recognition of your own lack of knowledge, a recognition of your need to seek healthy guidance, some sort of a degree of immunity to the flatterer. Because if you're humble, you won't take the words of the flatterer as easily as the person who is proud, to whom they come very readily. And you'll also be someone who's able to accept rebuke and to learn in that sort of way.

And so there's that very basic orientation. But it's not just about humility. It's also about the fact that this is the God who has given the law.

And as you reflect upon that law, you will grow in wisdom. If you read within Psalm 119, David describes his being wiser than his teachers. Wiser than the elders because he has reflected upon God's law and commandments.

So this is something that the people of God were to grow in. But there's something more particular here. The body of the wisdom literature is associated with the kings.

If we look at the law, it's associated with the priests in particular. The priests guarded the law and taught the law. But the kings were entrusted with wisdom.

They were the ones who had the knowledge of good and evil to be able to see and to judge situations within Israel. And that knowledge of good and evil, that wisdom, is what we see exemplified here. What we see within Solomon, for instance, is a growth and a depth of wisdom.

And something that continues on in Israel's story. It's a growth from what has gone before. And it's a flowering of the wisdom of Israel so that people come from all around to hear Solomon's wisdom.

He speaks about all these natural realities, about trees and birds, about different features of the environment. This natural reality. And he speaks about it in a way that draws the attention of the surrounding nations.

Because they see there's something about this guy that is different. He's reflected upon reality and therefore he can speak well about it and to it. If we read the book of Proverbs alongside the other wisdom books, it's also interesting to notice that there's something new that's brought into history at this point.

The words of the law is very much do this, don't do that. It's very much a law that's concerned with sharp lines. It's concerned with the sanctuary.

It's concerned with the proper mode of worship, the beginnings of life. And yet the wisdom literature is associated with kings, with judgment, with rule, with dominion. It's associated with the strength and effectiveness of dominion, as in the case of the book of Proverbs.

And also the struggles and failures and difficulties of dominion, as in the case of Job, who was a king. As many people miss that, but Job was a king. And Ecclesiastes, which is talking again about the struggles of rule, the struggles of establishing dominion in a world shaped by vapour.

When we go to the book of Psalms as well, the book of Psalms introduces song to the mix. So no longer is it just prose and command, but it's now song. And David introduced song to the worship of Israel with his establishment of his tabernacle.

Elsewhere, what we see in the book of Proverbs is something that's particularly associated with this period of time in Israel's history. The movement from law and command and just speech to song, to wisdom, to judgment, to greater dominion. And so as Israel enters into greater dominion, they come with a new degree of wisdom to be able to rule and to speak about reality in a way that resonates with people, whatever background they come from.

This is not a word of the covenant that is unique to Israel. This is a word about natural realities that everyone of the surrounding nation should be able to recognize and say, here is someone who has an understanding heart, someone who has seen reality truthfully. But yet that's all grounded upon the fear of Yahweh.

It's grounded upon training in the law. It's grounded upon the movement from priesthood to kingship. And it's grounded upon God's work in giving Solomon wisdom, in establishing Israel with a kingdom and all these other things that associate with that particular time.

And so it should not surprise us that there is a great similarity between this wisdom literature and the wisdom literature that pagans would write. Just as it shouldn't surprise us that many pagan kings and people came to Solomon to learn from his wisdom, to see the well-ordered kingdom that he established. All of this represents a flowering of God's promises to Israel, a flowering of the promises that were associated with the king writing out a copy of the law for himself.

The king had to reflect upon the word of the law very deeply. He was someone who wrote out this law. He was someone that reflected upon it and was a student of it.

And as he was a student of it, he could then speak with wisdom to reality. And this is something that as Christians we need to work towards. We need to be people who are renowned for our prudence, our discernment, our judgment, our wisdom.

Because we are people who have grounded ourselves in scripture, what God says about reality. We have a head start. We have an insight into reality that people who reject God's word and law will not have.

People who have neglected that basic orientation of the fear of the Lord will lack wisdom and they will display their folly in all sorts of different ways. Even if they have very sharp brains, they will reveal their folly. And so I think there is a connection between this book and the rest of Israel's covenant history.

Just as there is a reason why there is a great resonance between this book and the wider revelation that we see within nature. This is not just about the revelation of natural realities. Rather it's about insight into that revelation.

It's about the word of the wise king who's able to pick out features of that reality. Also

it's important to recognise that the book is written for rule, for kingdom. It's written and associated with Solomon.

And so this is a book that's associated with Israel's rule, with Israel's kingdom. It's written for the prince. The prince to train him to choose who is the right bride, who is the right princess.

It's to train him in how to judge between people. How to judge and recognise the fool or the simple and how to recognise the wise or the person who's on the path towards wisdom. It's to help the young prince to establish himself with wise counsellors around him.

And all these different things are part of Israel's history. It's an important part of Israel's coming to the flowering of God's purpose for it. And we see this I think in that passage I read earlier from Deuteronomy.

I hope that this helps. If there's any further questions that you have or follow-ups to this, please leave them in my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support my videos, please do so using my Patreon account.

And if you would like to tell anyone else about these videos, if you found them helpful, please do so. It's great to have more viewers and listeners and I hope that you have found this particular video helpful. I look forward to be back tomorrow and God bless you all.