

# OpenTheo

## #70 Wisdom literature - Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Job

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom Wright answers listener questions on Proverbs, Song of Solomon, the concept of 'Wisdom' in the Bible and whether we should take the book of Job literally?

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## Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Hello there and welcome back to the show. It's Justin Briley, Premier Theology and Apologetics Editor, bringing you the program that gives you an insight into the mind of Tom Wright, the famed New Testament theologian, author of many books, former Bishop of Durham. And today we're taking your questions on wisdom literature, things like Proverbs and the Song of Solomon and other parts of the Old Testament.

So I hope you enjoy today's show. Always lovely to hear from listeners of the show and Elizabeth left a review on the Evangelism and Sharing the Gospel episode earlier in the year, said, "Wow, this has been so helpful to get my perspective back on track for sharing the Gospel well. I've had years of bad or empty church experiences and realised I'm slightly disillusioned now.

I'm at a chapter of Wright's book, Surprised by Hope, I think, for Bible College and discovered I'd never been taught about eschatology or even how to find good literature

on Sound Doctrine. Tom Wright has changed my view and opened a way that God used to change my hope and my life. Elizabeth, great to have you as part of the listening community of Ask and T Wright anything.

And the show of course brought to you in partnership with Premier SBCK and NT Wright online. If you want more from the show, go to our show page at ask NT Wright dot com where you can find more resources and ways to support the show as well. For now, let's get into today's edition of the programme.

Welcome back to this week's edition of the show. It's always a pleasure to sit down with Tom Wright and ask the questions that you've sent in. And today, we've compiled them all under the heading of wisdom literature.

Now, if I said that, Tom, not everyone would necessarily know exactly what genre of writings that that refers to in the Old Testament, do you want to just sort of give a sense of what you you classify under the title of wisdom literature? Yes, the phrase "wisdom literature" is a modern phrase to describe or denote books which aren't part of the five books Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, which are the Torah proper, and nor are they part of the prophets, which is the former prophets, the books of Samuel and Kings, and the latter prophets, the great ones like Isaiah, etc., on to Malachi. But come somewhere else, and the early Jews who were reading and studying their scriptures had these different categories of the law, the prophets, and the writings. And much of what we think of as the wisdom literature is really in what they called the writings bit.

And so we have, in the English Bibles, you've got one and two chronicles. They come right at the end of the Hebrew Bible, and you've got Ezra and Nehemiah, which are really like an extra bit on the end of one and two kings or one and two chronicles. And then you've got a book like Esther, but then you've got Job, you've got the Psalms, and then Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

And in a sense, they are all quite a bit different. You know, the Song of Solomon is quite a different sort of thing from the book of Job, and they are both quite different sorts of things from Proverbs. But the general category of wisdom has been used as a way of saying that lot, which are not in a historical sequence, nor in a prophetic sequence, but they are kind of things which you might want to go with any other point in the whole story, as it were.

And particularly, the whole point of wisdom is this is about how to be genuinely human, which is the lesson that anyone needs at any time. And the answer is you need to be wise, and the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And so it's that kind of slogan, which then, which you do get in the book of Proverbs and in the book of Job, it's that which then gives these their peculiar flavour.

That's a great helpful way of understanding this genre. So I've selected a few questions around some of these various books that fall under that category. And first of all, Kellen, in West Kalauna, in Canada, asks this, "Song of Solomon, how should we understand it? Sometimes I feel like we try too hard to make it say something more than it's saying plainly, but perhaps I am missing something." So how do you understand the Song of Solomon? I'm cautious about the Song of Songs.

When I was an undergraduate, one of my best friends was absolutely enraptured with the Song of Songs. And I remember we had a kind of division between us that I was very much in love with the book of Isaiah, and he was very much in love with the Song of Songs. I remember saying, "Okay, you'll be a specialist on that, and I'll do Isaiah." And I fear that ever since then, though I have read some commentaries and I've checked things this way and that and discussed it and even preached on the odd passage, I've never been a specialist.

However, when I go back to the Song of Songs and look at some of what's been written recently, the first thing to say is the obvious thing. This is an amazing love poem about the love between a man and a woman. And it's more complicated than that because we're not sure that it's the same man going on through the whole poem and it probably isn't, and it has overtones of King Solomon, and Solomon, as we know from his story in the rest of Scripture, was somebody who was not a one-girl guy.

He was somebody who had many wives and many concubines. And so there are kind of tensions there, but at the heart of it is the kind of mystery of discovering in this other human being a beauty and a glory and a joy and a rapture which is hard to beat whether through music or the beauties of wider nature or whatever. It's just intense, intimate, but also almost one might say cosmic.

And I think we have to relish that and we have to reflect that over against the very negative traditions in some forms of platonic religion which have seen sexuality and sexual behavior as dirty, as unclean, as unworthy of God. This is a way of saying what Genesis 1 says and what Genesis 2 says, that the man and his wife are naked and not ashamed. And there is a sense when God brings Eve to Adam and he says, this is now a bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.

And those who know the Hebrew better than I do say that that phrase has the ring of a celebration. Wow, this is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. And I couldn't have asked for anything, anyone more amazing.

So the first thing to say is it's part of the glory of creation, the creation of man and woman in God's image in Genesis 1, the creation of man and woman to work together in God's world in Genesis 2 is a wonderful thing to celebrate in all its bits and pieces in all the glory and delight and the puzzlement of erotic love. Having said that precisely because it is about the fulfillment of God's good creation, Genesis 1 and 2, it is also then

sending out signals about the coming together of heaven and earth, the coming together because in Ephesians 1 Paul talks about God's plan being to sum up in Christ all things in heaven and on earth in him. And in Ephesians 5 reflecting the same point he talks about the coming together of man and woman in marriage as a kind of completion of a sign of the God's good purposes for creation instead of pulling apart heaven and earth they have to come together.

And therefore the ancient Jewish readers and commentators and on into the later rabbis and on into some Jewish traditions in the modern period have always seen this as an allegory of God and Israel, the bridegroom and the bride, the great theme in Scripture. And so it's perfectly possible to read it like that and many mystical writers, many allegorical interpreters have done that and then that comes through into Christian tradition in terms of the relationship between Jesus the Messiah and his bride the church and that takes us all the way to Revelation 21 when the Holy City of the New Jerusalem comes down like a bride adorned for her husband that we the people of the Messiah are to Jesus like the bride to the bridegroom and he is to us like the bridegroom to the bride. But in saying all of this we need all of these levels and if I was preaching a series on this which I have no intention of doing any time soon I would want to explore each of those levels rather carefully and say this is part of the glory of God's good creation and you have to receive it as catalogically as that which will be fulfilled on the last day rather than simply trying to apply it only to details of the hearing now whether in the erotic sense or in the mystical union with Christ sense or whatever.

So a glorious book but a very puzzling book and we should be very careful about how we read it and talk about it. Yes and in a sense just to come back to Kellen's question are we trying too hard to make it say something more than it's saying plainly. Well I suppose at the plain level absolutely it is a poem about erotic love between your people and sort of saying this is good, this is a God given thing and in a sense I think the church has had a history of sort of trying being a bit embarrassed about that and wanting to spiritualize it entirely because they are embarrassed by the physicality of the whole thing.

That's right but what I was trying to do in my answer was to say precisely that in God's good creation heaven and earth are made for one another and it isn't neither all. Absolutely thank you so much for the question Kellen I hope that helps in some way. Let's move on to another book of the Old Testament that often is seen in this wisdom literature genre.

"Loys in Houston Texas says and specifically about wisdom why is wisdom in Proverbs called a she?" I don't know if you've got any examples to hand Tom off the top of your head I'll look for a few while you're answering this but yes that is the way wisdom is referred to in Proverbs isn't it? Yes and the easy answer is that the noun for wisdom, Hockmark in Hebrew and Sophia in Greek is a female noun and so whether you say that God so ordered the language that this would come out I really don't mind but the point

there is that within the book of Proverbs wisdom itself is then portrayed as a great wise lady standing at the street corner beckoning people saying come this way learn of my wisdom discover what it means to be a truly human being and she has spread her table and invited her guests and so on and that opening nine chapters of Proverbs is an amazing picture of this hospitable lady who longs to welcome us and so that wisdom is not something which oh my goodness this is going to be difficult to learn wisdom is about being invited to a banquet and then as it were discovering good table manners as the thing is going on contrasted with then lady folly who is saying oh come this way I'll give you some cheap thrills and then the book says but the person who goes that way doesn't know that the dead are there that her guests go down to show and that's that's that so it's partly that it's an allegory and it's partly a linguistic thing and then that comes through actually into some of the Christian mystical traditions as well and it's very interesting that Jesus himself is spoken of in the New Testament in language borrowed from the wisdom tradition language about wisdom the famous opening to John's gospel in the beginning was the word obviously word is a masculine noun and it refers to Jesus who is a man not a woman at the same time what it says about Jesus and Paul does something similar as well is borrowed from some of the lady wisdom language as though Jesus is summing up all of that tradition to honor not to obliterate it but to honor it in himself so that's probably as far as we can get just now yeah and I suppose at least a little bit of a comeback to those who would claim that all of Old Testament literature is incredibly patriarchal in its assumptions that obviously goes against that entirely. Yes yes and I mean I think our modern ideas of patriarchy are actually far too blunt an instrument to do justice to what's going on in ancient society as a whole we are not in a good place in modern western culture to think that we have got gender roles figured out and that everyone else was getting it wrong things are much more subtle and intricate in the ancient world than we often like to make out. Let's go to another question final one for today's podcast Stephen Beaverton says do you believe the book of Job is a true story what book of the and the subsequent question what book of the Bible do you think people do not read enough but let's start with the Job question because this is this is I know divided many people down the years um Job's generally categorized again in this wisdom literature it's it's really about the you know what we what we get from this conversation between Job and his friends and then Job and God and a lot of people have said don't worry about the historicity of this that's not what it's there for others are very concerned with the idea that yes this did in some literal sense take place all of these events of Job and then these conversations with his friends and and so on the conversation with God so where where do you fall on this one Tom? Well um it's interesting my reaction reading if I was just reading the book of Job as an ancient book I would say what a great story and it's like a novel or it's like a Shakespeare play or something um partly because of course all the speeches are very very stylized Job's comforters so called speak in these definite chunks and then Job replies in definite chunks and then when God speaks God speaks in these very similar ways and it's set out like a kind of like a Greek play or something where the chorus does this and the actors

come on right in a for us rather stilted fashion in other words it doesn't read like real life at all it really really doesn't at the same time um then there's there's that very interesting very interesting passage in um the book of Ezekiel in the book of Ezekiel chapter 14 when God is saying that when I am planning to judge a land for its wickedness even if Noah, Daniel and Job these three were in it they would only save their own lives by their righteousness that's Ezekiel 14 verse 14 and then repeated in Ezekiel 14 verse 20 so the writer there of Ezekiel it may be that he's saying somebody like Noah or Daniel or Job it sounds as though he's referring to them as real people so I want to say it's perfectly possible that Job was a real person and that really bad things did happen to him and so on but this book has been amazingly edited to be a work of majestic poetry um laying out the moral dilemma of what happens when bad things happen to good people what do we say about that and so on is God adjust and so on holding out the different twos and froze that the human race always goes round on this so I want to say it's not a true story in the sense that it's a transcript of um something that actually happened it may well be that there was a man called Job etc but again the beginning and ending of very very stylized in terms of how many children Job had and what happened and so on and it sounds as though it's a deliberate quite clear setup not in the sense that it's trying to deceive but in the sense that it's saying once upon a time supposing there was somebody who and if we read it like that we are not being unfaithful the danger is that so many Christians have been told oh you can't believe anything in the Bible um you know that Jesus never existed or whatever it is and then they've said oh we've got to defend everything as though everything in the Bible is purely as it happened as though it's a photographic transcript and we need to lighten up we need to say no God wanted us to have this book but he wanted us to have many genres in this book and this is one of them and it's a kind of a stylized fictionalized almost theatrical telling of a story which even if it has some purchase on reality way back when it doesn't need to have happened like this any more than Shakespeare's saying like Beth needs to have happened exactly like that even though there were kings and queens in Scotland um in the just I was going to make the the same analogy with with Shakespeare that obviously a lot of his plays are based on some historical person or set of events but inevitably the way he presents them to us are in a sense entirely some level fictionalized for the purposes of of of what the story is of course it doesn't mean there wasn't a real Mac Bethall Macbethall whatever yeah right right but um anyway whether we do meet whether in the new creation we will find that there was a job and that all these things happen to him well again it's one of those things we'll we'll be delighted to discover but in for now thank you so much Tom for another fascinating delve into the Old Testament again not your specialty but always interested to hear your thoughts on it so thank you so much and thanks for the questions that have come in on wisdom literature and we'll see you again next time thanks for listening to today's show and if you're back again next week we'll be looking at your questions on the new testament you've got some tricky questions for Tom to answer he'll do his best next week don't forget that SBCK Tom's UK publisher and partner with this podcast have

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