Wisdom Literature

St. Paul Bible College

Online Lecture Series 10

Yesu Karunanidhi

Lesson Outline

I.Introduction and Background

II.Wisdom Movement in Israel

III.Aims of the Wisdom Literature

IV.Literary forms

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VI. The Book of Job

VII. Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)

VIII. Wisdom of Sirach

IX. Wisdom of Solomon

X. Song of Songs

XI. Theological Inspiration and Message of the Books

I. Introduction and Background

1. Introduction

- 5 books: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Wisdom of Solomon
- Psalms ??? Wisdom Psalms (Pss. 1, 119)
- Song of Songs ???

- Wisdom portions (Tob 4:3-21)
- Wisdom influences (Gen 2-3)
- Wisdom Apocrypha (Story of Ahikar)
- Wisdom is the property of the world
- Egypt (Onomasticon, Instruction of Ptahotep)
- Mesopotamia (Epic of Gilgamesh)
- Greek (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle)

2. Wisdom Literature

- Canonical: (1) Proverbs; (2) Job; (3) Ecclesiastes; (4) Psalms; (5) Song of Songs
- Deutero-Canonical: (1) Wisdom of Sirach; (2) Wisdom of Solomon

II. Wisdom Movement in Israel

To denote 'wisdom', Hebrew uses 'Hokmah'. SA. 'understanding,' 'insight,' 'knowledge'

- Greek, Sophia
- Latin, Sapientia
- Opposite: 'folly'

1. Folk Wisdom (before 1020 BC)

- 'popular wisdom', 'proverbial wisdom', 'gnomic wisdom'
- intelligence plus experience
- to observe the world carefully. 'Go to the ant' (cf. Prov 6:6-11)
- The primary school of wisdom is 'house itself'

Pre-monarchical wisdom is folk / popular wisdom

- proverb, riddle, saying, parable
- Laws are the developed form of folk wisdom.Clan wisdom. Cf. Exod 23:8. on bribe

2. Royal Wisdom (1020-587 BC)

- Court wisdom'
- to run the govt. efficiently
- Solomon, the traditional patron and the founder of the wisdom movement in Israel, and the author of all the Wisdom Books (???). cf.
 Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wis. of Solomon

3. Theological Wisdom (after 587 BC)

- Scribal wisdom, Deuteronomic wisdom
- the Babylonian Exile
- an inward movement
- God is the source of wisdom. Fear of the Lord (Prov 1:7). Relation between God and the humans.
- 'godly' vs. 'ungodly'

III. Aims of W.L.

1. Human Wisdom

- Experience or skill in a particular field (Sir 38:24)
- E.g., carpentry

2. Pivine Wisdom

- God is the source of wisdom
- Before the temple I asked for her' (Sir 51:13-14)

3. Personification of Wisdom

- One of the attributes of God
- Lady Wisdom' or 'Wisdom Woman' (Prov 1-9). 'mother,' 'sister,' 'bride.' cf. Egyptian 'ma'at'
- God breaks through the boundaries of gender
- 'Folly' 'Strange woman'

4. Life: Goal of Wisdom

- Goal of wisdom is life.
- Summary in one word: 'life' (Sir 4:12)
- Life for the wise is here and now: faithful wife/ husband, obedient children, true friends, riches in plenty, honour, health, and *shalom*.
- Tree of life, fountain of life, way of life

5. Good and Bad Conduct

- adopting a lifestyle
- right / better righteous behaviour

6. Retribution

- mechanical correspondence in which it is believed that the righteous will be rewarded and the unrighteous, punished
- the law of karma in Hinduism
- This doctrine was challenged and rejected by Job and Qoheleth,

IV. Literary Forms

Wisdom books is in poetry.

- Hebrew poetry is parallelism: synonymous parallelism (Prov 4:11); antithetical parallelism (Prov 10:20); synthetic parallelism (Prov 19:24)
- Wisdom and Wisdom treatises

1. Mashal Wisdom

- 'Mashal' = 'to be like'
- Analogy or comparison
- 'maxim' (Prov 13:3), 'adage', 'simile', 'metaphor', 'allegory', 'parable', 'riddle', 'paradox', 'numerical saying'

2. Wisdom Piscourse

autobiographical narrative (Prov 7:6-27); prayer;
 hymn; lament; didactic poem; dialogue;
 discourse

V. Book of Proverbs

Hebrew, 'mashal'

- seven titles: 'Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel,' 'Proverbs of Solomon,' 'Words of the wise', etc.
- Parallels between Prov 22:17-24:22 and the Instruction of Amenemope

1. Structure

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i. Introduction (1:1-9:18)
ii. Proverbs of Solomon - Collection I (10:1-22:16)
iii. a. The Words of the Wise (22:17-24:22)
b. The Words of the Wise - Appendix (24:23-34)
iv. Proverbs of Solomon - Collection II (25:1-29:27)
v. The Words of Agur (30:1-33)
vi. The Words of King Lemuel (31:1-9)
vii. Conclusion (31:10-31)
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2. Historical Context

- Exilic and post-exilic periods. Uncertainty and confusion.
- Internally, crisis of identity.
- Externally, unjust and exploitative economic structure.
- Mixture of popular, court, and royal wisdom.
- No central theme

3. Scope

- In the title (Prov 1:2-6)
- 'Fear of the Lord'

4. Wisdom's Role in Creation

- Many voices: parents, teachers, sages, kings
- One major voice: Wisdom Woman (chs. 1-9)
- Woman of Worth. Acrostic poem (Prov 31:10-31)
- Creation theme in Prov 8:22-31. Cf. Gen 1.
 Wisdom existed prior to creation.
- Wisdom theology is creation theology.

VI. Book of Job

- Wisdom reflections starts from experience
- Human suffering a universal experience
- Eternal problem which is not so easily dismissed: the innocent suffering, i.e., when individuals or even whole populations undergo suffering for no apparent reason
- Questions about God: How can an all-loving and all-powerful God allow suffering? Where is God when human beings suffer? Is God a sadist? Etc,

- All religions have attempted to solve it
- Mystery. We are part of it. Cf. Problem.
- Theodicy. Defending God.
- Job's suffering is representative of human agony

Questioning the Answers

- Suffering. Innocent Suffering. Why? Universal Experience and Expression. Retribution theology a failure? Is not God just? Is God a sadist?
- "Death in my sight today, like the odour of myrrh, like sitting under an awning on a breezy day; Death is in my sight today, like the longing of a man to see his house (again), after he has spent many years held in captivity." (A Dispute over Suicide, c.a. 4000 BCE)
- "On the day shares were allotted to all, my allotted share was suffering, My god, the day shines bright over the land, for me the day is black, Tears, lament, anguish, and depression are longed within me, Suffering overwhelms me like one who does nothing but weep." (A Man and His God, c.a. 2000 BCE)

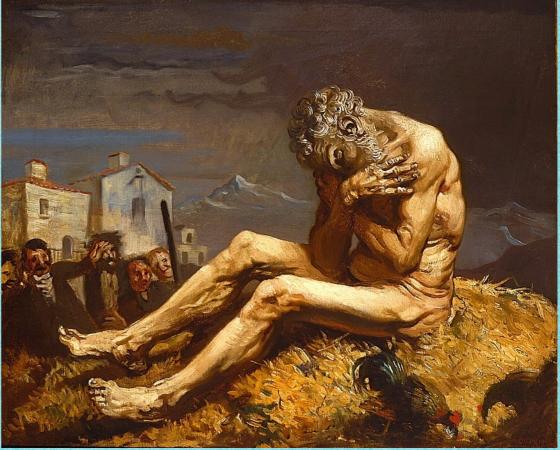
- "There is suffering in the World. The cause of the suffering is desire. The end of suffering is possible. This is the (eightfold)path that frees us from suffering." (Buddha, c.a. 500 BCE)
- Suffering on account of commitment to the truth (Jesus of Nazareth, Harishchandra)
- "Blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil ... was the greatest of all the people of the East." (1:1,3)

1. Structure

- 42 chapters
- Prologue (1:1-2:13) Prose
 - Dialogues (3:1-42:6) Poetry
- Epilogue (42:7-17) Prose
- Sandwich structure

Job in Art





2. Historical Context

- Pre-Mosaic times
- Early post-exilic period (538 400 BC)
- Severe economic crisis. Taxation. Question of God's justice and innocent suffering.
- A model of faith and fidelity
- Inconsistencies within the person of Job
- Two major characters: Job and God

3. Characterisation of Job

- blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil'
- His world begins to crumble. Reduced to total poverty. Deprived of children. Stricken with a deadly disease. Unbearable physical suffering. Isolated from the community. Silent for seven days. Lament.
- The friends trying to console him underline the iron law of retribution (Job 4:7-9; 5:14-27)

- In their eyes, he could only be classified as a hypocrite and a secret sinner. This is the main burden of their argument which runs through three rounds of speeches and counter-speeches (Job 4-14; 15-21; 22-27).
- Eliphaz attacks his integrity and accuses him of serious and heinous crimes which include economic abuse of the poor, refusal to help the afflicted and lack of compassion for the bereaved (Job 22:6-9).

- Job's culture placed great emphasis on honour.
- Job describes his social conscience and commitment to justice, as putting on righteousness and justice like a garment (Job 29:14).
- Job proudly challenges God (31:35-37)

2. Characterisation of God

- God dominates the entire book; from the beginning, it deals with the critical question:
 What kind of God is he that allows the innocent to suffer?
- Double exploration of his character: the dialogue (Job 3:1-37:24) depict God as humans see him, and the 'theologue' (Job 38:1-42:6) depicts God, as He sees himself.

- God of Job is not just any deity.
- The God of the whirlwind first conducts a 'cosmic tour' and points out to Job several features of the cosmos
- Then a gallery of wild animals is paraded before Job (Job 38:39-39:30).
- The elaborate and elegant description of Behemoth, the fiercest of the land animals (Job 40:15-24), and of Leviathan, the most dreadful of the sea monsters (Job 41:1-34), comprises the bulk of the second discourse

Identity of the Character of Job

- 1. Perfect person (1:1-2)
- 2. Pampered servant (1:6-12)
- 3. Disinterested believer (1:20-22)
- 4. Self-centred observer (2:4-5)
- 5. God's Guinea pig (42:10-11)
- 6. Universal sufferer (3:1-4)
- 7. Patient sufferer (6:1-4)
- 8. Blind sinner (11:1-6)
- 9. Investigator of good and evil (7:1-6)

Life Lessons

- a. There is a limit for everything.
- b. Wisdom begins when we know the limit.
- c. Accept suffering; accept the suffering ones.

VII. Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)

- Qoheleth is not actually a name; but it is a title which occurs seven times in the book (Eccl 1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9,10).
- The Hebrew root *QHL* means "to assemble, collect."
- Therefore, Qoheleth means 'assembler' (of students, listeners) or 'collector' (of wisdom sayings).
- One third of the book is in poetry and the rest, in prose. The author evaluates his own personal experience (Eccl 1:12-2:26) and shares his conclusions and convictions with his readers.

1. Structure

Stereotyped expressions like 'vanity of vanities' (Eccl 1:2; 12:8) 'under the sun' (Eccl 1:3; 2:11), 'chasing after wind' (Eccl 1:14; 2:11)

- i. Introduction (1:1-11)
- ii. The 'Royal Experiment' (1:12-2:26)
- iii. Relation between Wisdom, Happiness and Justice (3:1-9:10)
- iv. Value of Life (9:11-12:8)
- v. Conclusion (12:9-14)

2. Historical Context

- Hellenistic period between 300 and 200 BC
- Persian economic system of taxation
- Qoheleth has been labelled as a skeptic, pessimist, stoic, epicurean, hedonist, materialist and the earliest existentialist

Qoheleth's Skepticism

- Life as empty. Hebel. Breath. Gen 2:7. Gen 4:2
- Three crises of meaning: (a) his ignorance of ultimate frustrated him; (b) his sense of life's injustice left him puzzling over its implications; (c) his perceived lack of gain generated a good deal of uncertainty regarding the proper course. (Eccl 8:16-9:1)
- Fatalism. Divine predetermination.
- Irony of divine disorder. (1:18). Envy (4:4). Cf. 5:10, 5:11, 5:12, 6:7-9, 8:10, 8:14, 10:5-7.

3. Central Message

- Qoheleth undertakes an investigation of daily experience: pleasure (Eccl 2:1-11), work (Eccl 1:2-11; 2:18-26; 3:1-15), wealth (Eccl 5:9-16), justice (Eccl 3:16-22; 7:15-16), honour (Eccl 6:2), wisdom (Eccl 7:23-25) and life (Eccl 2:16-17).
- Life is God's gift.
- Rejoice' and 'Remember' (Eccl 11:4 12:8)

Does not use the personal name for God, i.e., Lord.

- But uses 'Creator'. 40x
- Life is meaningless. But God is not.
- Book is read during the Feast of Tabernacles

VIII. Wisdom of Sirach

- Only book in the OT in which the author specifically identifies himself as "Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sirach (Hebrew ben Sirah)" (Sir 50:27).
- In Greek, his book is known as the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sira. Since it was very much used for worship and instruction down through the ages by the Christian Churches, it is known as 'Ecclesiasticus', a Latin word meaning 'Church (book).'

1. Structure

- i. Prologue (Translator's)
- ii. Wisdom of the Wise (1:1-43:33)
- iii. Praise of the Ancestors (44:1-50:21)
- iv. Conclusion (50:22-29)
- v. Appendix (51:1-30)

2. Historical Context

- Ben Sirach lived during the Hellenistic period.
- Hellenisation. Antiochus IV
- Greek Way vs. Jewish Way.
- Two Way Theology
- Originally written in Hebrew
- cf. Jews and other Christians. Apocryphal.

3. Torah Wisdom

- No central theme.
- Variety of topics: friendship (Sir 6:5-17; 22:19-26; 27:14-24; 37:1-6), family relationship (Sir 3:1-16; 26:1-27), true worship of God (Sir 34:21-36:22), duties towards the poor and oppressed (Sir 4:1-10; 34:21-27), health (Sir 30:14-17; 38:1-15), almsgiving (Sir 3:30-4:6; 29:8-13), table manners (Sir 31:12; 32:13), death (Sir 41:1-16) and so on.

Origin of wisdom (1:1-10)

Praise of wisdom (24:1-33)

4. Praise of the Ancestors

- Sir 44:1-50:21
- The most unified and cohesive part of the book. It reviews the history of Israel through the stories of its great heroes of the past.
- Twelve categories. 30 Heroes.

Ben Sira weaves together the three major streams of tradition - the prophetic, the priestly, and the wisdom currents - and created a new theological synthesis.

IX. Wisdom of Solomon

Wisdom of Solomon combines traditional Jewish faith, with Greek concepts and modes of expression.

It must have been written directly in Greek by a Jew born and brought up outside Palestine, most probably in Alexandria.

1. Structure

- i. Book of Eschatology (1-5)
- ii. Book of Lady Wisdom (6-9)
- iii. Book of History (10-19)

2. Historical Context

- Alexander the Great
- Many Jews gave up their Jewish identity
- Middle of the first cent. BC
- Last OT Book. One of the Deutero-canonical books.

3. Book of Eschatology

- The righteous vs. The wicked
- Life after death. Immortality of the soul.
- The wicked will be punished. Here or There
- Funeral reading (Wis 3:1-6)

4. Book of Lady Wisdom

- The immortality promised to the righteous is grounded in their right relationship with God.
- Union with Lady Wisdom is the only way to ensure perfect communion with God.
- Wisdom's association with God in his work as creator and saviour is explained by means of, a prose litany, celebrating the mighty deeds of Isis, the Egyptian goddess of wisdom.
- Wisdom in Israelite history

5. Book of History

- This part consists of the reflection on the Exodus story (Wis 11:1-14; 16:2-19:22) and a polemic against idolatry (Wis 11:15-16:1).
- The author follows the Midrashic style and makes use of seven contrasts.
- Intertextual reading of the plagues. Wis 11-19

X. Song of Songs

- Song of Songs. Canticle of Canticles.
- Love poetry. Anthology of love songs. During the marriage celebrations.
- Collected in the fourth cent. BC
- Solomonic composition
- Love lyric is universal. Parallels in other lit. possible

Overview

- Expressions of emotions (longing, devotion, adoration)
- Passionate tone
- Dramatic poem (characters, scenes, settings, actions)
- Theme: Love ("love is as strong as death" 8:6)
- Love remains despite interference (2:7), separation (5:6), and beating (5:7). Its intensity never diminishes.

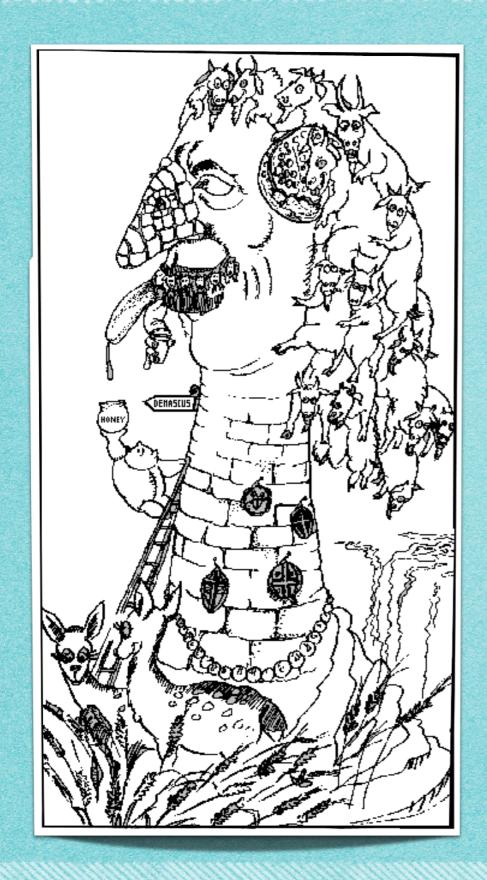
Speakers in the Song of Songs

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1. Woman (1:2-4, 5-7, 12-14, 16; 2:1, 3-7, 8-17; 3:1-5, 6-11; 4:16; 5:2-8, 10-16; 6:2-3, 11-12; 7:10-8:4; 8:5b-7, 8-10, 14)
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- 2. Man (1:9-11, 15, 17; 2:2; 4:1-15; 5:1; 6:4-10; 7:1-9; 8:11-3)
- 3. Chorus (1:8; 5:9; 6:1; 6:13; 8:5a)

Themes in the Song of Songs

- Love (1:2-4; 8:6-7)
- Pastoral images (1:5-8; 2:1-17; 4:1-5:1; 6:4-10; 6:11-13; 7:1-8:4)
- Royal references (3:6-11)
- Night / sleep (3:1-5)
- Questions (5:9; 6:1)
- Breasts / building imagery (8:8-10)
- Vineyard / Solomon (8:11-12)
- Isolated statement (8:13-14)





1. Interpretation

- i. Covenant between YHWH and Israel (Hos 1-3)
- ii. Spousal love between Christ and Church (Eph 5:21-24)
- iii. Mystical love between Christ and soul

Four Possible Genres

- a dream or dreams
- a collage
- love notes (in a figurative sense)
- an elaborate royal wedding

Theology of the Book

- Absence of God
- Anthropology: theology of the body (5:10-16; 4:1-15; 5:1-2)
- Genesis story: Adam and Eve (Gen 2:23-25) Human sexuality
- Covenant relationship (Jer 2:20; 3:1; Eze 16, 23). Cf. Eph 5:22-23.
- Work (1:6, 8; 2:12, 15; 8:7)

XI. Theology and Message

1. Retribution

- Practical wisdom.
- Good brings good. Evil brings evil.
- God is the author of life.
- Innocent suffering?

2. Creation

- Wisdom theology = creation theology
- Animals are given as examples for human living.
- Observation of the world
- Humans are part of the environment.

3. Personification of Wisdom

- Lady wisdom. Self-revelation of creation.
- Vs. Lady Folly

4. Wisdom Experiences

- Day to day life experiences
- To know the truth
- Human person is the starting point

5. Wisdom and Moral Action

- Two way theology.
- Choose the right way. The way to life.

6. Wisdom and Skepticism

- Accepting our limitations
- Surrendering to God

7. Wisdom and Immortality

- Goal of wisdom is life.
- Union with God.

Conclusion

- Wisdom was active in Jesus' time as well.
- Sermon on the Mount
- Instructions of Paul, and John.
- Christological hymns.
- Epistle of James. Wisdom Lit.

Review Questions

1.The English term wisdom comes from the Hebrew term: C. *Hokmah*.

2.Folk wisdom is also known as. B. Popular wisdom.

3. The primary school of wisdom is: C. House itself.

4. The Goal of wisdom is: A. Life.

5.Qohelet was written by: C. Person Unknown

- 6. Sirach was originally written in: A. Hebrew language.
- 7. Wisdom theology also has a name as: A. Creation theology.
- 8. The only book in the OT that deals with the death positively: C. The Wisdom of Solomon.
- 9. The wisdom is the property of the: C. Whole world.
- 10. Qoheleth means: A. Collector.

Answer in Paragraph

6x5=30 marks

- 11. Explain the doctrine of retribution.
- 12. How is Job portrayed?
- 13. What do you mean by 'Torah Wisdom'?
- 14. Write important features of the wisdom theology.
- 15. What is the destiny of humankind according to the book of Wisdom?
- 16. How do you interpret the Song of Songs?