

Where is Wisdom to Be Found?

Proverbs as Wisdom Literature

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Abstract

In this introductory lecture, Dr. August Konkell explores the nature of wisdom (hokmah) as both a practical skill for daily living and an orientation grounded in the fear of the Lord. He contrasts wisdom as a distinct vehicle of divine revelation alongside the Law (Torah) and the Prophets, highlighting its unique role in guiding everyday decisions and personal relationships. The session examines the linguistic forms of proverbs—such as Hebrew mashal and didactic instruction—and outlines how the book of Proverbs transitions from foundational moral instruction to specific situational aphorisms aimed at establishing a lasting legacy.

Outline

I. Introduction and Speaker Background

A. Speaker Profile

1. Dr. August Konkell, Professor of Old Testament at McMaster Divinity College
2. Academic background: Westminster Theological Seminary and Providence Theological Seminary
3. Personal background: Farm upbringing and early encounter with agricultural proverbs ("don't cry over spilled milk")

B. Universal Nature of Proverbs

1. Linguistic phenomena present across all cultures and languages
2. Cultural dependence: Meaning, interpretation, and application depend on cultural context
3. Examples from African wisdom (e.g., testing river depth; knowledge as an uncultivated garden)

II. The Concept of Wisdom (Hokmah)

A. Linguistic and Semantic Scope

1. Hebrew term hokmah: Broad meaning encompassing skill and knowledge
2. Technical craftsmanship versus practical life skill (knowing how to live)
3. Contrast with modern Western definitions restricted to decision-making

B. Foundational Orientation

1. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" as the central unifying theme
2. Wisdom begins as an internal attitude or disposition leading to ethical conduct

C. Three Biblical Wisdom Books

1. Proverbs: Practical conduct in daily decisions and ordinary events
2. Ecclesiastes: Philosophical reflection on meaning, value, and significance ("why")
3. Job: Exploration of human limits, epistemology, and response to suffering ("what we know")

III. Wisdom as Divine Revelation and Authority

A. Purpose Statements of Proverbs

1. To know wisdom, discipline, and words of knowledge
2. To acquire insight in righteousness, justice, and equity
3. To give prudence/craftiness to the gullible and discretion to the youth

B. Three Means of Revelation in Israel

1. Law (Torah) given through Priests: Foundational instruction and covenant terms
2. Word from Prophets (Nevi'im): Preaching, covenant enforcement, and historical application
3. Counsel (Ketuvim) from Elders/Wise: Practical discernment of God's will in ordinary life
4. Scriptural attestations: Jeremiah 18:18 and Ezekiel 7:26

IV. Literary Classifications and Genres of Wisdom Literature

A. Structural Divisions of Proverbs

1. Didactic Wisdom (Chapters 1–9): Parent-to-child instruction building character and virtue
2. Cross-cultural parallels (e.g., Egyptian Teaching of Amenemope)
3. Aphoristic Collections (Chapters 10–31): Short, memorable, situational sayings

B. Hebrew Mashal

1. Broad definition: Encompasses proverbs, parables, poems, and extended metaphors
2. New Testament parallels: Jesus's synagogue sayings and parables (e.g., mustard seed, prodigal son)

C. Nature and Function of Aphorisms

1. Characteristics: Short, memorable, assonance, and intentional ambiguity
2. Situational truth: Proverbs apply to specific contexts (e.g., distance making heart fonder vs. out of sight out of mind)
3. Observation of social and moral order: Inviolable principles governing human relationships
4. Focus on legacy: Building an unblemished reputation throughout life (Ecclesiastes 7:1)

V. Structural Overview of the Book of Proverbs

A. Introduction and Didactic Foundation (Chapters 1–9)

1. Purpose statement and Lady Wisdom's call from the towers (Chapter 1)
2. Lady Wisdom's feast and banquet (Chapter 9)

B. Solomonic Collections (Chapters 10:1–22:16)

1. Primary collection consisting of exactly 375 proverbs

C. Supplementary Collections

1. Sayings of the Wise (Chapters 22:17–24:34)
 2. Hezekiah's collection compiled by court scribes 250 years after Solomon (Chapters 25–29)
- D. Appendices (Chapters 30–31)
1. Words of Agur and numerical sayings (Chapter 30)
 2. Sayings of King Lemuel's mother and the poem of the virtuous woman (Chapter 31)