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Edited by Katherine J. Dell , Edited in association with Suzanna R. Millar , Arthur Jan Keefer

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## **Part I**

### *The Context of Wisdom Literature*

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## I Introduction

KATHARINE J. DELL, SUZANNA R. MILLAR AND  
ARTHUR JAN KEEFER

The Cambridge Companion series is a well-established one, covering many subject areas and topics. Within biblical studies and theology, it has a reputation for outstanding contributions to the range of biblical reference material currently available. The series is accessible to beginners in the field, but also offers more depth for those wishing to engage with topics at a deeper level. Its appeal is both to the general reader and to the specialised scholar in the way that the essays combine a comprehensive overview of the state of play with new research insights from individual contributors, each an authoritative expert in the field. To this series, we editors are proud to add an essential guide to the biblical wisdom literature (focusing on the Hebrew Bible). We use the word 'biblical' but, of course, the volume also extends to extra-biblical material relevant to our understanding of biblical texts both from the ancient Near Eastern world and from the extra-canonical wisdom material. Edited by Katharine Dell, Suzanna Millar and Arthur Keefer, all contributors and experts in the wisdom material, the essays each offer fresh research combined with scholarly overview and textual engagement in a synthesis of scholarly rigour and wider public appeal. Each essay pursues its own viewpoint rather than promoting any overall theories and whilst there can be overlap between them, the contexts of discussion are always slightly different.

Study of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (OT/HB) is an exciting and fast-moving field. Ideas regarding the definition and scope of the literature are of particular concern at the present time – old boundaries and assumptions are under review, even including the nomenclature of 'wisdom literature' itself! Literary questions continue to be asked, such as those related to form, content and genre, as well as enquiries about the role of oral culture and the rhetoric of teaching and didacticism. The question of the context(s) in which wisdom literature arose is an ever-changing one. Issues of oral and literary dissemination of ideas and texts, cultural contexts of court,

school and home and evolving ideas about scribal culture are particularly timely. Studies in intertextual links across the wisdom literature and beyond are also under current discussion, as are new approaches from virtue ethics and theology.

This Cambridge Companion seeks to provide an in-depth overview of the major changes in approaches to different wisdom books and across the literature. It will follow closely the traditional parameters of the category of 'Biblical Wisdom Literature' but allow room for questioning those limits. Each of the major works of wisdom literature is under consideration (Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and the 'wisdom psalms'), as well as (more controversially) the Song of Songs, which is not commonly considered a wisdom text. The volume will cover the extra-canonical wisdom books of Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon (extra-canonical for Jewish and Protestant Christian circles but included in the Catholic and Orthodox canons) and it treats key comparative ancient Near Eastern material as well. Essays also include issues of methodology in approaches to the subject, reader responses to texts and interesting insights from reception history. In that sense, it is grounded in modern scholarly concerns, hence bringing a fresh, up-to-date slant on the fascinating and important texts generated by circles of the wise in ancient times.

Part I deals with the context of wisdom literature. Tremper Longman (Chapter 2) begins the Companion by setting the stage for many of the chapters that follow. Of first importance is the fact that discussing 'biblical wisdom literature' is not as simple as it seems. The category as such has been questioned, and, even among those scholars who agree to use the phrase, what it means and designates remains up for debate. Longman presents the various viewpoints in terms of the 'traditional view', reactions to it and 'the way forward'. Matters of genre, the grouping of biblical texts and their social location or worldview arise, as do suspicions about how 'wisdom literature' came about within scholarship as featured in certain recent repudiations of the terminology. Longman's way forward indicates that Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes do indeed have meaningful affinities and that these texts can and should be studied together, as well as in relation to other OT/HB texts.

Noting these debates around whether 'wisdom' constitutes a genre, Suzanna R. Millar (Chapter 3) instead studies the multiple smaller genres of which wisdom literature consists. Texts use (and sometimes intentionally misuse) genres to communicate with readers, providing them with conventions for interpretation and expectations about

content. Surveying Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon, Millar discerns four clusters of genres, grouped according to their communicative purpose. Some genres intend to instruct their users (sayings, instructions, diatribe, protreptic and didactic narratives); others engage in reasoning (reflections and wisdom dialogues). These genres are not unexpected in wisdom literature, but the next are more familiar from other biblical corpora: some genres offer praise (either to wisdom, people or God), and others enunciate complaints (laments and legal complaints). These multiple genres combine and interact in complex ways within each wisdom book.

Knut Heim (Chapter 4) then examines the literary and historical contexts of wisdom literature, taking the book of Proverbs as a case study and surveying the work of key scholars in the field. Beginning with literary context, he argues that the sayings are organised into 'clusters' through linguistic and thematic links with their neighbours and that this context has hermeneutical significance. Particularly important is the placement of religious proverbs, which are well integrated with their surroundings. This calls into question the scholarly assumption that religious elements are a late addition to the book and that wisdom was originally a 'secular' endeavour. Rather, elements like the 'fear of the Lord' were already embedded within the sayings collections by the time an editor added chapters 1–9. This has implications for the historical development of Proverbs and, more broadly, of wisdom in Israel.

Next, Mark Sneed (Chapter 5) introduces readers to the world of scribes. Drawing first on some of the earliest developments of Sumerian scribalism, he gives an overview of how scribes trained and worked in the ancient Near East more broadly. In Egypt and elsewhere, scribal training began at an early age and involved a wide range of curricula, including wisdom literature, which scribes copied and memorised, as it played a significant role in scribal education. Although concrete evidence for Israelite schools is lacking, Sneed finds reason to believe that similar scribal practices existed there, where wisdom literature too served technical and ethical purposes. Scribes, then, existed in ancient Israel, and for Sneed could be identified in various ways: as priests, prophets and sages. Behind each of these categories lies the 'scribe' as the one who composed the texts themselves. Thus, Sneed finds far more that is common than different among the biblical materials, wisdom texts included, and conceives of the scribe as holding a wide-ranging professional role in Israel that was not tied down to a single genre of literature.

Katharine Dell's contribution (Chapter 6) explores the question whether there is a distinctive set of theological ideas for the three key wisdom books – Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. After a brief survey of scholarship on this debate over the last century and a half, key themes that the books have in common are explored, with salient examples – the doctrine of retribution, the fear of the Lord, the figure of Wisdom and the attainment of wisdom, the theme of creation, communication and life and death. Although considerable commonality is found, there is also a discovery of difference and of interlinking with other books in the canon. The themes themselves are not confined to these 'wisdom' books, even though they characterise them and they are accompanied by an essential didactic approach.

With his 'Solomonic Connection', David Firth (Chapter 7) observes the man Solomon as he appears in Kings and Chronicles. Solomon is 'paradigmatic' for understanding wisdom in both of these books and yet he is not treated identically therein. Kings and Chronicles offer different portraits of this exceedingly wise king, whether that be his foundational role for wisdom or his problematic relationship with it. Matters of the temple, Solomon's behaviour, Torah and the very conception of wisdom itself all have a place in biblical presentations of Solomon. Firth looks closely at 1 Kings 1–11 and 2 Chronicles 1–9, employing a literary and theological reading that does not let one account determine the other or allow the Solomonic portraits in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes to have all of the attention.

Part II focuses on wisdom literature in the OT/HB. In his chapter on Proverbs, Christopher Ansberry (Chapter 8) provides a refreshing introductory approach to the book, not least because he starts with the history of interpretation rather than letting thematic concerns dominate. He identifies five patterns within the history of the book's interpretation, including a focus on character formation, debates about the nature of its 'wisdom' and place in the canon, interest in its reception via matters of date and authorship, the discovery of comparative ancient Near Eastern material and current, expanding interdisciplinary approaches to the book. A section on the fundamental nature of the book takes on matters of form, genre, poetic features and the idea of a 'collection', whilst granting admiration rather than suspicion to the complexities of the book's sayings. Likewise, the structure of Proverbs, though containing many parts, comes together into a coherent whole, an 'anthology', to which each piece contributes. Ansberry concludes by proposing four 'dominant' themes in the book: the fear of the Lord, a theological orientation that takes on an intensely personal

characterisation, wisdom, a skill and holistic product of education, never far from the images of the book; moral order and created order; and retribution and reward. In all of this, Ansberry keeps scholarly alternatives on the surface of discussion without shying away from making the case that some such alternatives are more plausible than others.

Will Kynes (Chapter 9) then introduces the book of Job by asking 'What is the book of Job, and how does that affect how you read it?' This question entails investigation into the book's genre, for genre recognition provides a horizon of expectations which shapes the reader's perspective. Job has traditionally been read as wisdom literature, based on perceived similarities with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in form, theme and Sitz im Leben. However, this genre grouping leads to Job's unwarranted separation from the rest of the canon, theological abstraction and hermeneutical limitations. Job is an open and ambiguous text which might be placed in multiple genre groupings. Kynes surveys several of these (*sifre emet*, lament, exemplary sufferer texts, poetry, drama, controversy dialogue, history, epic, didactic narrative, Torah, prophecy, lawsuit and apocalyptic), as well as some meta-generic readings (parody, citation and polyphony). Given this diversity, and recognising that all readings are culturally contingent and only partially appropriate, he advocates a multi-perspectival approach which draws insights from many directions.

Mette Bundvad (Chapter 10) considers Ecclesiastes as a book of contradictions and one that has a peculiar narrator and special thematic concerns. Instead of giving a catalogue of possible or plausible contradictions in the book, Bundvad surveys the ways in which scholars have reckoned with the book's evident tensions. The question that emerges, then, is whether these contradictions are a feature of the book or a 'bug' of sorts. Ecclesiastes' portrayal of its narrator falls under the rubric of these very tensions, exhibiting a man, or men, who wears various guises and no one persona. Bundvad concludes with reflections about the book's treatment of time, a theme that does not resolve every tension but does open up new questions and possible structures.

Jennifer Andruska (Chapter 11) sees close affinities between the Song of Songs and Wisdom Literature. She acknowledges that this is a minority position, surveying the history of reception, which has offered various alternative interpretations (e.g., literal, allegorical, cultic, feminist). She then defines wisdom literature, centralising the forms found in ANE advice literature, the concern for wisdom and the intended character transformation of the audience. All of these are found in the Song. Andruska discusses the *mashal* (proverb) in 8:6–7 and the

intergenerational instructions found in the refrains (2:7, 3:5, 8:4). She argues that the Song offers wisdom about love, didactically advocating one particular vision of love (in contrast to other ANE love songs, which give varied depictions of love). The purpose of the Song is to transform its readers into wise lovers who follow the example of the lovers in the Song.

Next, Simon Cheung (Chapter 12) discusses the scholarship surrounding the ‘wisdom psalms’, with an eye towards the varied proposals, as well as the grounds for and development of them over the last century. From this, Cheung sets forth his own conception of wisdom psalms. They constitute ‘a family of psalms, with varying degrees of membership, that exhibit a wisdom-oriented constellation of its generic elements’. The core traits are likened to DNA, which can be more or less present, and are mainly discerned in theme, tone and intention. ‘Wisdom psalms’, to some degree, then, feature wisdom, carry an ‘intellectual tone’ and a pedagogical intent, all of which Cheung inspects in Psalm 34:8–17. Overall, his approach may offer interpreters additional accuracy when considering wisdom and its influence within the Psalter.

In the final chapter of Part II, Michael C. Legaspi (Chapter 13) examines ‘Wisdom’s Wider Resonance’. It has been common to find the influence of wisdom literature across the canon, but Legaspi outlines the problems with this and takes an alternative approach. He examines the *h-k-m* (‘wisdom’) root in parts of the Bible not usually associated with wisdom literature to find overlooked resonances of the concept. Specifically, he examines the idea that wisdom concerns the relationship between human and divine realms (common in Greek and Jewish thought). This understanding is evident in biblical descriptions of sacred spaces, for the lead craftsmen who construct the tabernacle and temple (Bazalel and Hiram respectively) are divinely endowed with wisdom. Equally, wisdom (albeit a corrupted wisdom) proliferates in Ezekiel 28, associated with proximity to and specialist knowledge of the divine and construction of sacred spaces. A similar understanding may also underlie Jeremiah’s descriptions of Jerusalem’s degraded wisdom. This analysis encourages us to understand ‘wisdom’ more capaciously than traditional delimitations of ‘wisdom literature’ allow.

Part III moves to consider wisdom literature beyond the traditional canon of the OT/HB. First, Seth Bledsoe (Chapter 14) introduces the second century BCE wisdom book of Ben Sira. While not forming part of the Tanakh or Protestant Old Testament, Ben Sira appears in the Septuagint (LXX) and subsequently the Roman Catholic and Eastern



Orthodox canons. The book presents itself as the words of a well-educated scribe and draws on both Jewish and Greek traditions. Central to the book is the figure of Wisdom, which is intimately connected to creation, fear of the Lord, Torah and tradition. It also contains advice on practical matters, such as finance (it both respects wealth and advocates generosity) and relations with women (it is in places decidedly misogynistic). Although generally optimistic that good deeds will lead to positive consequences, Ben Sira also grapples with the problems of theodicy and death, concluding that righteous persons can live on through the legacy of a good name.

The somewhat neglected Wisdom of Solomon, or 'Book of Wisdom', contains concepts important not only for understanding wisdom in the rest of the OT but also for understanding how wisdom bridged both testaments. Joachim Schaper (Chapter 15) gives priority to the book's theology and its place in Hellenistic Jewish and early Christian thought. He provides an overview of the book's structure and versions, its intellectual context, its universalistic conceptions of God and humans in history and how the book exhibits a 'spiritual exercise'. Most important here are Wisdom's use of πνεῦμα ('spirit') and its amalgam of Platonic, Stoic and Egyptian elements. It offers a distinct interpretation of the Exodus, with which Schaper accounts for ideas of liberation and eschatology. As for the book as spiritual exercise, the discussion turns to matters of genre and literary function, disclosing its purpose to fortify religious beliefs and one's self-mastery.

In 'Wisdom at Qumran', David Skelton (Chapter 16) takes stock of the Dead Sea Scrolls and shows that they, in some ways, differ from the wisdom literature of the OT/HB. The Scrolls lack those references to Solomon that seem so characteristic to biblical wisdom; and whilst they exhibit Wisdom as a personification, she is 'toned down' and appears more passive than she does in, say, Proverbs 1–9. Amplified in tone are the Torah-wisdom connection and apocalyptic nature of the Qumran materials, not least the well-known *raz nihyeh* ('the mystery of existence' or 'mystery that is to be'). Skelton also discusses the importance of poverty and hymnody in the Scrolls, to conclude by drawing these many distinctives together, as well as the Hellenistic context, pedagogy and scribal practices, in order to reconsider the notion of 'wisdom literature' and the scholarly consensus surrounding it.

Moving into the wider world of the ancient Near East, Michael Fox and Suzanna R. Millar (Chapter 17) examine Egyptian wisdom literature. They begin with an overview of extant examples from the Old Kingdom to the Late Period and then turn to some major themes and

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issues. They consider Ma'at (the regulating force of truth/justice), character development (particularly as expressed through polar character types), pedagogy (including the debate about who is capable of learning) and transmission (through the generations in oral and written forms). The second half of the chapter assesses some commonly proposed examples of Egyptian influence on biblical wisdom literature, namely, the influence of the Instruction of Amenemope on Prov 22:17–23:11 and elsewhere in Proverbs, Egyptian parallels to Proverbs 8, Egyptian parallels to Prov 23:12–24:22, an alleged precursor to Job 38–39 in Egyptian onomastica, and connections between Ben Sira and the Demotic Instruction *Phibis*.

Noga Ayali-Darshan (Chapter 18) covers the wisdom works and vernacular sayings of Syria-Palestine from the Late Bronze Age. This material exists in some form of Akkadian, including Sumero-Akkadian and Akkadian-Hurrian, all of which comes from sites at Ugarit and/or Emar. Darshan organises the works into four types: practical wisdom, disputation poems and fables, critical wisdom and righteous sufferer compositions. Much of her chapter introduces readers to the texts themselves, by way of their provenance, language and versions. Additionally, some thematic and particular linguistic reflections are given. In short, this chapter provides an introduction to an emerging, and perhaps neglected, area of wisdom from the biblical world.

Paul-Alain Beaulieu (Chapter 19) examines Mesopotamian Wisdom. While acknowledging that there is no native category of 'wisdom literature' in Mesopotamia, Beaulieu nonetheless finds it a helpful classification. Within this category are texts of several genres: we find disputations which begin with a mythological introduction, progress to a verbal contest between non-human combatants and conclude with the victor pronounced by a god. There are proverbs, found in collections and quoted in letters, as well as fables, often about animals. Instructions and admonitions transmit antediluvian wisdom to post-diluvian generations. Some texts reflect on the problem of theodicy, ruminating on the human-divine relationship and individual divine retribution, while others lament the futility of life and advocate a *carpe diem* attitude. School debates centralise learning and the scribal arts. These texts are linked by intertextual references and shared features, such as their frequent ascription to individual wise figures, assumption of the absolute and inscrutable power of the gods and reflection on the human predicament.

In Part IV, the chapters consider certain important themes and issues in wisdom literature. First, Zoltán Schwáb (Chapter 20) discusses creation in the wisdom literature. He begins with a historical overview,