

Wisdom Literature and the Quest for Wisdom: Babylon and Beyond

Richard Mussard

Department of Philosophy, Political Science and Public Administration, USI

What is Wisdom Literature?

According to scholarly tradition, the idea of “wisdom literature” arose as a way to characterize certain books of the Hebrew Bible. The phrase refers mainly to the group of biblical works including Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and two works from the Apocrypha—Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and the Wisdom of Solomon. Certain psalms are sometimes included.¹ These works explicitly discuss and use the word *wisdom*. The author of Proverbs (incorrectly thought for a long time to be Solomon) represents the broad purpose of these writings, stating that through the proverbs, “men will come to wisdom” and gain “righteousness, justice and probity.” They will “acquire skill to understand proverbs and parables, the sayings of wise men and their riddles.”² A familiar example is: “A father who spares the rod hates his son, but one who loves him keeps him in order.”³

Moreover, whereas wisdom writers exemplify certain common literary forms and themes, they typically omit others.⁴ For instance, usually these writers omit an accounting of God’s actions in history to bring about human salvation of his chosen people. This tempts some critics to look at these works as secular. But that would be to ignore the clear presupposition of God’s presence, as well as many explicit references to God and to wisdom’s requiring that human beings recognize him. Thus the author of

¹ Some psalms having common wisdom themes include; e.g., 1, 32, 37, 49, 112, 128. In 128, for example, the theme is that the faithful who “fear the lord” will be blessed with a devoted family.

² Proverbs, 1:1-6. The New English Bible With the Apocrypha, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970)

³ Proverbs, 13; 24. See also 23:13-14; 29;15.

⁴ On the point of what is absent in the books, Roland E. Murphy remarks, with some exceptions regarding later works, “The most striking characteristic of this literature is the absence of what one normally considers as typically Israelite and Jewish. There is no mention of the promises to the patriarchs, the exodus and Moses, the covenant and Sinai, the promises to David (2 Sam 7), and so forth.” The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans,, 2002) 1.

Proverbs says, “The fear of the lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools scorn wisdom and discipline.”⁵

The themes most common in these works concern guidance for family life and childrearing, guidance about living with others and achieving proper goals for human beings, and guidance for bearing life’s adversities, injustices, and uncertainties. These works offer answers to questions about the meaning of life—naturally the wisdom writers largely expressed the fruits of their own observations and experience on these matters. The literary forms most pervasive are the proverbial sayings and aphorisms, but wisdom literature also may include poetic speeches, hymns, general reflections on life, and other forms.

For biblical writers, Solomon is a central wisdom character, and we read about his wisdom in important verses from Kings I. Indeed, we learn that “God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure” and that it “surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the East and the all the wisdom of Egypt.” In addition,

He also uttered three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; he spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom.⁶

We must emphasize that Solomon’s wisdom is ultimately an inheritance from God—which Solomon asked God for (Kings 1 3:6-14)—and that the author knows the wisdom literature of the East, and that he believes that Solomon’s wisdom surpasses that of the East. Furthermore, his wisdom is expressed *directly* in proverbs and songs, not *indirectly* through mythical narratives.⁷

The International Character of Wisdom Literature

⁵ Proverbs 1: 7. Also, “The fear of the Lord brings length of days; the years of the wicked are cut short” 10:27.

⁶ Kings I 4.29-34.

⁷ See Murphy 1-3. He notes that it is now widely accepted that three books historically attributed to Solomon as “author” up to the medieval era--Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Wisdom of Solomon--were wrongly attributed to him.

We speak of the international character of wisdom literature because the themes, forms, and didactic purposes of Israelite wisdom literature have counterparts beyond the borders, and before the time, of its emergence among the Israelites. Thus, one leading scholar, W. G. Lambert has brought forth a now established collection of writings titled Babylonian Wisdom Literature.⁸ Lambert notes that the term *wisdom* is “strictly a misnomer as applied to Babylonian literature.” But the term, he says, “has been used for a group of texts which correspond in subject matter with the Hebrew Wisdom books, and may be retained as a convenient short description.” He includes a work of guidance, the Instructions of Shuruppak, and a collection of 160 moral exhortations called the Counsels of Wisdom⁹ (ca 1500-1200 B.C.E.). In the former Shuruppak instructs his son Ziusudra as follows.

19 “Do not make a guarantee (for someone); the person will have a hold on you.”

30 “The Thief is a lion; after he is caught he is a slave!”

65 “Do not rape a man’s daughter; she will announce it to the courtyard.”¹⁰

The Counsels of Wisdom covers a variety of topics about which the author urges proper moral conduct as indicated by these topics.¹¹

- (a) **19-25 Avoidance of bad companions.**
- (b) **26-30 Improper speech.**
- (c) **31- . . . Avoidance of altercations and pacification of enemies.**
- (d) **. . . – 65 Kindness to those in need.**
- (e) **66-71 The undesirability of marrying a slave girl.**
- (f) **72-80 The unsuitability of prostitutes as wives.**
- (g) **81 . . . The temptations of a vizier.**
- (h) **. . . – 134 Improper Speech**
- (i) **135 – 47 The duties and benefits of religion..**
- (j) **148 - . . . Deception of friends.**

⁸ Lambert, Babylonian Wisdom Literature, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 1.

⁹ Lambert considers these in chapter 4, “Precepts and Admonitions,” BWL 92-107.

¹⁰ These translations occur in Richard J. Clifford, The Wisdom Literature, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 28. As he indicates, they are his translations from Römer’s German translation of the Old Babylonian Sumerian text (note 7, page 170).

¹¹ Lambert 96-107.

(a) 19-25 Avoidance of bad companions.

21 Do not converse with a tale bearer,
22 Do not consult [with a . . .] . . . who is an idler;
23 In (your) good grace you will become as a mind for them,
24 Then you will reduce your own output, forsake your path,
25 And will let your wise, circumspect mind be considered rebellious.

(b) 26-30 Improper speech.

26 Let your mouth be controlled and your speech guarded:
27 Therein is man's wealth—let your lips be very precious.
28 Let insolence and blasphemy be your abomination;
29 Speak nothing profane nor any untrue report.
30 A talebearer is accursed.

(c) 31- . . . Avoidance of altercations and pacification of enemies.

36 When confronted with a dispute go your way; pay no attention to it.
41 Do not return evil to the man who disputes with you;
42 Requite with kindness your evil-doer,
45 Maintain justice to your enemy,
46 Smile on your adversary.

(d) . . . – 65 Kindness to those in need.

57 Do not insult the downtrodden and [. . .]
58 Do not sneer at them autocratically.
59 With this a man's God is angry,
60 It is not pleasing to Šamaš, who will repay him with evil.

(e) 66-71 The undesirability of marrying a slave girl.

71 “The house which a slave girl rules, she disrupts.”

(f) 72-80 The unsuitability of prostitutes as wives.

72 Do not marry a prostitute whose husbands are legion,
77 There is no reverence or submissiveness with her.

(g) 81 . . . The temptations of a vizier.

86 But do not covet any of this, {The Prince's wealth}

(h) . . . – 134 Improper speech

128 Do not say evil things, speak well of people.

(i) 135 – 47 The duties and benefits of religion..

139 Prayer, supplication, and prostration
140 Offer him daily, and *you will get* your reward.

(j) 148 - . . . Deception off friends.

150 If you have promised, give . [. . .]

Two other works address the problem of unjust suffering in a world ruled by supposedly just gods. In one monologue, Ludlul Bel Nēmequi (The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer),¹² a noble person speaks of the various adversities that have befallen him while nevertheless proclaiming his devotedness to the god. Included in Tablet I, is the following:

73 My lofty head is bowed down to the ground,
74 Dread has enfeebled my robust heart.
75 A novice has turned back my broad chest.
76 My arms, (though once) strong, are both paralysed.
77 I, who strode along as a noble, have learned to slip by unnoticed.
78 Though a dignitary, I have become a slave.
79 To my many relations I am like a recluse.
80 If I walk the street, ears are pricked;
81 If I enter the palace, eyes blink.
82 My city frowns on me as an enemy;
83 Indeed my land is savage and hostile.
84 My friend has become foe,
85 My companion has become a wretch and a devil.¹³

In Tablet II, the righteous sufferer speaks of his devotion to the gods:

23 For myself, I gave attention to supplication and prayer;
24 To me prayer was discretion, sacrifice my rule.
25 The day for reverencing the god was a joy to my heart;
26 The day of the goddess's procession was profit and gain to me.¹⁴

But despite his devotion and righteousness, he suffers greatly. In later tablets, though, he is relieved of his diseases and restored to his former position in life. But we never hear why this righteous person has undergone his suffering. Did Marduk simply make a mistake in not protecting the righteous sufferer, but corrected his error in the end?

¹² Dated in the Cassites era, 1500-1200 BCE.

¹³ Lambert 33.

¹⁴ Lambert 39.

Another work, The Babylonian Theodicy (1500-1200 BCE or a little after) appears as a dialogue form between one who suffers unjustly and a friend who tries to reconcile his suffering with belief that deity justly orders the universe.¹⁵

Sufferer V

45 I bow to you, my comrade, I grasp your wisdom.
46 [.] . . the utterance of [your words.]
47 [.] . . come, let me [say something to you.]
48 The onager, the wild ass, who filled itself with . . [.]
49 Did it pay attention to *the giver of assured divine oracles*?
50 The savage lion who devoured the choicest flesh,
51. Did it bring its flour offering to appease the goddess's anger?
52 [. . .] . The nouveau riche who has multiplied his wealth,
53 Did he weigh out precious gold for the goddess Mami?
54 [Have I] held back offerings? I have prayed to my god,
55 [I have] pronounced the blessing over the goddess's regular sacrifices, [. . .]

Friend VI

56 O palm, tree of wealth, my precious brother,
57 Endowed with all wisdom, jewel of [gold,]
58 You are as stable as the earth, but the plan of the gods is remote.
59 Look at the superb wild ass on the [plain;]
60 The arrow will follow the gorer who trampled down the fields.
61 Come, consider the lion that you mentioned, the enemy of cattle.
62 For the crime which the lion committed the pit awaits him.
63 The opulent nouveau riche who heaps up goods
64 Will be burnt at the stake by the king before his time.

65 Do you wish to go the way these have gone?
66 Rather seek the lasting reward of (your) god!¹⁶

The contributions of Egypt also include instructional works spanning over millennia. The oldest is the Instruction of Prince Hardjedef, (ca 2450-2500 B. C. E.).¹⁷ Another is the Instruction of Amenomope, (ca 1100 B. C. E.)¹⁸ Such Instructions address a youth and offer practical suggestions about how to live a happy life. The Instruction of

¹⁵ Lambert 63-91

¹⁶ Lambert 74-75.

¹⁷ M. Litchtheim, Ancient Egyptian Literature. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973-1980) 3 vols, Vol. I, 58-59.

¹⁸ Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament, (ed. J. B. Prichard; 3rd ed.; Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969.

Amenomope is of special interest to scholars of the biblical wisdom books because of the evidence showing direct, significant influence of the Egyptian text on the Book of Proverbs.¹⁹

The significant point about the international character of wisdom literature lies less in interesting questions about the extent to which Israelite literature is indebted to earlier material, and more in the recurrence of this universal form. Apparently human beings need wisdom, and because of that they need wisdom literature.

But we find wisdom literature well after antiquity. Richard J. Clifford speaks well to this point:

Is there such a thing as modern wisdom literature? The answer is yes, and a broad spectrum of its topics corresponds to biblical concerns. Hundreds of books and magazine articles deal with the topics of succeeding in business, handling relationships (friendships, colleagues at work), managing a family and household, learning to bear with equanimity life's pains and uncertainties, becoming a better person, making wise decisions, and reflections on such questions as God's presence in suffering, determinism and free will. Characteristic of the books and articles is their highly personal perspective. Missing from them are politics, economics, and history as well as national and international affairs; for these are not (for the most part) subject to personal decision and reflection. Wisdom literature is personal and familial.²⁰

Clifford goes on to note that biography and autobiography constitute one of the most common modern genres for wisdom literature in that these works attempt to tell how a man or woman succeeded in overcoming life's difficulties or attained a new level of insight. Yet, we must note what is missing from such wisdom writings: "politics, economics and history as well as national and international affairs." We want not only to note the existence of the literature, but also to evaluate the adequacy of its forms and themes in the quest for wisdom.

¹⁹ See Murphy for the connection between Amenomope and Proverbs 22:17- 24: 22., 23-25.

²⁰ Clifford 19.

In his book Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Harold Bloom supports the notion of the universality of wisdom literature. He asserts that “*all of the worlds cultures*—Asian, African, Middle Eastern, European/Western Hemisphere—have fostered wisdom writing.”²¹ Most relevant for us, Bloom expresses an expansive understanding of the scope of examples of wisdom literature. In addition to Hebrew writers, and Christian writings in the Gospel of Thomas, and St. Augustine, he takes special note of Plato and Homer, Cervantes and Shakespeare, Montaigne and Francis Bacon, Samuel Johnson and Goethe, Emerson and Nietzsche, Freud and Proust. These figures are wisdom writers and poets because of their use of the poetic forms of the wisdom writers, especially moral aphorisms..²²

Critique of Wisdom Writing

What can we reasonably say about the overall adequacy of wisdom literature? Do we agree with Bloom that poetic literature is where wisdom can be found? Are the answers literature provides as good as it gets in our quest for wisdom? This literature clearly speaks to vitally important questions. But, not all of the answers we need to know lie within the focus of wisdom writers. Indeed questions posed in other liberal arts and sciences are, at least largely, outside the scope of its gaze. As we noted earlier, wisdom writers have focused on discovering and transmitting knowledge about personal relationships and family life, and coping with adversities that disrupt them. Moreover, the method of wisdom writers has been naturally and exclusively reliant on personal observations, experiences, and reflection. Their writing has not revealed access to the full range of rigorous, well-tested methodologies.

²¹ Harold Bloom, Where Shall Wisdom be Found? (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 1.

²² For example, he observes that the dialogues of Plato, “at their best, are unique dramatic poems, unmatched in literary history.” Bloom 31. Johnson the literary critic, and Goethe the poet, are contrasted, “as wisdom writers, which means primarily moral aphorists, where they totally diverge.” (157) In regard to Freud, he does not “suggest that Freud was primarily a philosopher or a poet, but rather that his influence has been analogous to that of Plato, Montaigne, Shakespeare: inescapable, immense, almost incalculable.” (222) Freud is included on the basis of Civilization and Its Discontents.

To find a more comprehensive model for the knowledge that makes a wise person wise, we turn to philosophy, in the fullest understanding of its nature, as best embodied in Aristotle. Standing on the shoulders of his predecessors, Aristotle set forth a concept of philosophic wisdom that has proved historically influential.²³ This wisdom is one of several intellectual virtues he recognized. The possession of this wisdom involves, on one the hand, knowledge of first principles of the natural and practical sciences and on the other, knowledge of propositions that logically follow from them. In the 17th century, Leibniz advanced a similarly wide conception when he identified wisdom with “perfect knowledge of the principles of all the sciences and the art of applying them.”²⁴

While a proper explication of and critique of Aristotle’s idea, is beyond what I can accomplish here, the important upshot is, I suggest, that the aspiration of the core idea of wisdom ultimately cannot be accounted for and fulfilled without properly including the liberal arts and sciences. What counted as philosophy, for Aristotle, is still what we call philosophy: it includes metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics, political philosophy, and aesthetics, and a variety of topical “philosophy ofs.” But it includes, as well, the range of arts and sciences, now gathered under the banner of liberal knowledge. In the broad sense, persons with the PhD—whether in physics, chemistry, political science, history or literature—are parts of the philosophical cadre and hence contribute to wisdom.

Other sources of knowledge, beyond the liberal arts and sciences, also lay claim to wisdom. For example, consider the theological accounts of God’s acts and of his specific and direct revelations of wisdom to particular human beings. Clearly, any account of

²³ Ethics, VI, especially ch. 7. 1141a-9-1141b23.

²⁴ Leibniz, “On Wisdom,” Leibniz: Selections, (New York: Charles Scribner’s and Sons, 1951) 77. The full passage reads:

Wisdom is a perfect knowledge of the principles of all the sciences and of the art of applying them. By *principles* I mean all the fundamental truths which suffice to enable us to derive any conclusions we may need, by dint of some exertion and some little application; in sum, that which serves the mind to regulate manners, to make an honest living, and everywhere (even if one were surrounded by barbarians), to preserve one’s health, to perfect one’s self in any sort of things we may need, and finally, to provide for the conveniences of living. The art of applying these principles to situations includes in it the art of judging well or reasoning, the art of discovering unknown truths, and finally, the art of recalling what one knows on the instant and whenever needed.

wisdom must examine, and then accept or reject this data. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all depend heavily on the truth of their divine revelations for the truth of their claims as an important source of wisdom. Indeed, seekers of wisdom must assess knowledge-claims about direct messages to man from God, and about the direct (mystical) perceptions of God's presence and actions in the world, even if the ultimate assessment ends in vigorous denial or deep skepticism. Thus, theological beliefs, largely held in the background of ancient wisdom writers as they articulate their personal observations, must come to the foreground of reflection aiming at wisdom.

We may also examine legal systems as sources of data for wisdom, because law offers at least hypotheses about conduct that is wise. We must then count Hammurabi's law as part of the wisdom-data produced by the Near East. We must count the Israelite law of the Torah and later systems of law. Most Americans, I think, hold a deep conviction that the Constitution of the United States is a work of great wisdom.

But we must also note that a legal system can be, or can contain, elements that reveal or become, instances of great human folly (e. g., laws sanctioning and governing human slavery came to be, such instances of human folly). For an appreciation of the wise-making power of law, we should recall the history of the "reception" of ancient Roman law when, long after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, this law was rediscovered and become a source of university study and guidance in the Middle Ages.²⁵ Making human law and deciding individual cases on the basis of that law often provide instances of great wise-making reflections. Solomon's judgment in the famous case of two women who both claimed an infant, is often counted as a exemplar of wise judgment—although serious doubts have been expressed about his decision-making in the case.

Wisdom literature must continue to focus on historic themes and use traditional literary forms. Present-day wisdom writers, however, need a proper understanding of philosophy and the other liberal arts. Aphorisms and parables must be *linked* to the body of the

²⁵ For a short history of later reception of Roman Law see, Hans Julius Wolff, Roman Law: An Historical Introduction, (Norman Ok: U of Oklahoma P, 1951), 193-206.

liberal arts. Can we now critically assess a saying like “spare the rod and spoil the child” simply on our own observations and experiences, without considering data carefully gathered and rigorously analyzed by relevant liberal arts and sciences? Of course, the quality of the data gathering and its analysis belongs to the reflective process. A sage must guard against bad science and pseudo-science. The same must be said for bad and pseudo-history, and bad or pseudo-philosophy. Flawed methodologies and flawed applications of good methodologies are dangers for anyone who now pursues wisdom, or dares to be a wisdom writer.

A properly prepared sage will not abandon the themes and literary forms in the traditions of wisdom writers, ancient or modern. Aristotle as well as Plato wrote philosophical dialogues or what Bloom has called, in the case of Plato’s dialogues, “unique dramatic poems.” The thought of Epictetus and Epicurus appear in collections of sayings and reflections on the wisdom themes. Nietzsche and Schopenhauer make use of these forms and themes too. Aesthetically well-crafted sayings, character portraits, and fictional narratives, with a wise-making point or question, can direct the mind to and preserve for it important truths. These expressions can evoke, again and again, wise feelings, actions, and contemplations. At least, that is true for writings when their propositional contents, whether expressed or implied, are true and epistemically justified and when those contents also have a recognizably high intrinsic or instrumental value.

What we ultimately require, however, is a clear link between aphorisms and other literary forms—and the relevant liberal knowledge that justifies and confirms the aphorism or image. Our great model is Plato. In his dialogues he moves readily from dramatic narrative to liberal discussions that supports his “poetry.” From the famous myth, or allegory, of the cave, which provides a profoundly true image of the human condition—and which is one of my candidates for the greatest poetic truth ever told—Plato moves naturally and logically from the literary image of human beings chained in ignorance and needing good knowledge to escape, to his liberal commentary. We learn more, in the end, by attending to Plato’s actual practices of weaving literary and philosophical (or liberal) practices, than by accepting his explicit comments on poetry

and his grounds for censoring it. Only when we understand explicit commentary in the context of Plato's actual practice do we see a fair view of his understanding of poetry in relation to wisdom. Our own quest for wisdom depends on understanding the cooperative methods and contributions of the various liberal arts and sciences in the quest for wisdom.

The main problem with using these poetic tools from the wisdom writers is the same one we confront on any attempt to communicate through language; the difficult problem of selecting, using, reshaping, the language, or the context of its application, to secure clarity between speaker and hearer.