

LECTURE 20: INTRODUCTION TO WISDOM LITERATURE

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I. Wisdom Defined and Applied

A. Introduction:

1. Wisdom throughout the ages and in numerous cultures covers artisan skills, scientific knowledge, etiquette, philosophy, psychology, politics, sociology, jurisprudence, and the like. The common thread of all is that they address truth and order in God's world. John H. Walton and Andrew E. Hill write: "Creation brought order to the cosmos; law brought order to society; etiquette brought order to human relationships; politics brought order to governance and authority. **Ancient wisdom can then be understood as the pursuit of understanding and preserving order in the world**" (*Old Testament Today*, 2nd ed., 326).

Fig. 1. "Wise" People in the Bible

<i>Person</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Reference</i>	<i>Practice</i>
Joseph	Wise leader	Acts 7:10	Prepared for a major famine; helped rule Egypt
Moses	Wise leader	Acts 7:20–22	Learned all the Egyptian wisdom, then graduated to God's lessons in wisdom to lead Israel out of Egypt
Bezalel	Wise artist	Exod 31:1–5	Designed and supervised the construction of the Tabernacle and its utensils in the wilderness
Joshua	Wise leader	Deut 34:9	Learned by observing Moses, obeyed God, led the people into the Promised Land
David	Wise leader	2 Sam 14:20	Never let his failures keep him from the source of wisdom—fear of God
Abigail	Wise wife	1 Sam 25:3	Managed her household well in spite of a surly and mean husband
Solomon	Wise leader	1 Kgs 3:5–14; 4:29–34	Knew what to do even though he often failed to put his own wisdom into action
Daniel	Wise counselor	Dan 5:11, 12	Known as a man in touch with God; a solver of complex problems with God's help
Astrologers	Wise learners	Matt 2:1–12	Not only received special knowledge of God's visit to earth by checked it out personally
Stephen	Wise leader	Acts 6:8–10	Organized the distribution of food to the Grecian widows; preached the gospel to the Jews
Paul	Wise messengers	2 Pet 3:15–16	Spent his life communicating God's love to all who would

			listen
Christ	Wise youth Wise Savior Wisdom of God	Luke 2:40, 52 1 Cor 1:20–25	Not only lived a perfect life but died on the cross to save us and make God's wise plan of eternal life available to us
Adapted from the <i>Life Application Study Bible</i> (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1996), 985.			

2. Biblical wisdom states that the starting place for all true wisdom is “the fear of the LORD.” This is because truth and order in God’s world can only rightly be understood through acknowledgement of and submission to the one who brought order. True wisdom therefore transcends the basic knowledge or skill needed for a particular discipline by fixing that discipline within the grand purposes of God.

B. Definition:

1. **Wisdom** is about truth and order in God’s world. On the one hand, it is intimately related to the way God builds his kingdom on a cosmic scale, and on the other hand it addresses how God’s royal family should rule and live rightly in his world.
2. Specifically, **wisdom** is the exercised knowledge by which God oversees or governs his world in an ordered way and by which humans, through a fear-generating encounter with God (through his word and presence) are to do the same as his representatives (Gen. 1:27–28).

C. The Portrayal of Wisdom

1. Types and formats of wisdom:
 - a. Types:
 - i. Speculative wisdom: analyzing what is right and wrong (Job, Ecclesiastes)
 - ii. Prudential wisdom: considering what can make life better (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes)
 - b. Formats:
 - i. Monological: Presentation only of what is right and wrong (Job, Ecclesiastes)
 - ii. Dialogical: Presentation and response of what is right and wrong (Job)
 - iii. Proverbial (Epigrammatic): Pithy statements that attempt to capture in general ways what is right and wrong (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes)
2. Biblical wisdom books: All the “commentary” books in the Writings bear a stroke of wisdom, but Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are those that wrestle most intimately with these issues. Wisdom in Proverbs is approached from a somewhat different angle than it is in Job and Ecclesiastes.
3. In Proverbs:
 - a. In Proverbs, wisdom is portrayed as something humans are to pursue, as something God bestows, and as something that humans can gain and develop.
 - b. While affirming the cosmic-element of wisdom (Prov. 8:22–36), as a whole this book focuses on the human side, treating wisdom as a God-given and dependently exercised knowledge or understanding that enables a human to perform a task or skill rightly and to make God-honoring decisions, all grounded in the fear of the Lord. The wise are those who seek to know and live in accordance with God’s ways.
 - Prov. 1:7. The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
 - Prov. 2:1–8. My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, ²making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; ³yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, ⁴if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, ⁵then you will understand the fear of Yahweh and find the

knowledge of God. ⁶For Yahweh gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; ⁷he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, ⁸guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints.

- Prov. 8:22–23, 30–36. Yahweh possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. ²³Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. . . . ³⁰then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, ³¹rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man. ³²And now, O sons, listen to me: blessed are those who keep my ways. ³³Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. ³⁴Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. ³⁵For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from Yahweh, ³⁶but he who fails to find me injures himself; all who hate me love death.
- Prov. 9:10. The fear of the Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

c. Proverbs is mostly prudential, proverbial wisdom.

4. In Job and Ecclesiastes:

a. Job and Ecclesiastes affirm the call for humans to pursue wisdom and that through it alone is life, but they are also more explicit regarding the impact of the curse and the limitations of mankind.

b. In these books, emphasis is given to wisdom's relationship to God's vast, overseeing role as Creator in governing his world. Wisdom comes from God, is known by God, and is not fully disclosed to humans. The pursuit of wisdom, therefore, does not always arrive at clear answers, and much in this world does not make sense. The life of wisdom declared in Proverbs is not an easy path, and the truths of world order laid out in Proverbs do not always find immediate fulfillment. As such, Job and Ecclesiastes provide a balanced call to continue to fear and follow God and to turn from evil, even when life is filled with suffering and enigma. Wise living for humans always means *dependence* on a God who is not controlled but who is always in control.

- Job 28:20–28. For where, then does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of the living and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and Death say, "We have heard a rumor of it with our ears." God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he gave to the wind its weight and apportioned the waters by measure, when he made a decree from the rain and a way for the lightning of the thunder, then he saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out. And he said to man, "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding."
- Job 42:2–3. I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
- Ecc. 7:23–24. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?
- Ecc. 8:16–17. When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.
- Ecc. 12:11–14. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

c. Job includes speculative wisdom in both monological and dialogical formats; Ecclesiastes provides both speculative and prudential wisdom in both monological and proverbial formats.

D. James on Wisdom

1. Wisdom is gained through prayer (Jas 1:5–8).
 - Jas 1:5–8. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.
2. Wisdom from God vs. wisdom from demons (Jas 3:13–18).
 - Jas 3:13–18. Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

II. Wisdom, Law, and Covenant

A. Wisdom and Law

1. *Introduction:*
 - a. B. Wells and F. R. Magdalene propose that wisdom grew out of law “as an attempt to move from a strictly rules-based system that operated only within rigid boundaries to an advice-based way of living that had implications for areas of life outside the bounds of law” (*DOT:WPW*, 422). The implication that wisdom is a shift away from law seems unhelpful, for the law always provided the basis for a right worldview.
 - b. Meredith G. Kline held that the law provides a bare minimum standard, a boundary line that cannot be crossed, whereas proverbial wisdom sets the goals that we should aspire to fulfill (*Structure of Biblical Authority*, 64–67). This should be tempered only by the fact that wisdom seeks to live out the life framed by the law. The law provided general guidelines and examples but still needed to be embodied in daily lives with specific applications for every circumstance.
 - c. Sirach later held that a student of wisdom is nothing less than a student of *torah* (Sir 24:23; 38:34b; 39:8).
2. *The Law in Psalms.* Deuteronomy appears to supply the backdrop to “law” in the Psalms, as is suggested by a number of features. (Much of this material is taken from Wells and Magdalene, “Law,” *DOT:WPW*, 420–27.)
 - a. Deuteronomic language of law fills the so-called Torah psalms (Pss 1, 19, 119 = *tôrâ* “law, teaching,” *‘ēdût* “decrees,” *piqqudîm* “precepts,” *hōq* “statute, law,” *mišwâ* “commandment,” *mišpat* “judgment, ruling”), as well as other passages (e.g., 78:5).
 - b. The phrase “meditate on the law day and night” in Ps 1:2 appears to be an parallel with the only other use of the phrase in Scripture—Josh 1:8, which bear explicit reference to Deuteronomy.
 - c. Deuteronomic retribution theology fills the Psalter. In Deuteronomy, obedience will bring blessing of health, prosperity, and success (Deut 15:4–6; 28:1–14), whereas disobedience will result in curses of sickness, poverty, and defeat (28:15–68). Similarly, in the Psalms, Yahweh is judge over all the cosmos (e.g., Pss 7:8–11; 82:1), who makes covenants (e.g., 25:10; 89:3), investigates possible covenant breaches (e.g., 7:9; 17:3; 26:2; 44:21), and enforces the covenants with lawsuits (e.g., 82; 143:2). He evaluates the degree to which an individual or a society adheres to covenantal law (78:10; 103:18) and blesses or punishes accordingly (1:5–6; 5:12; 9:17; 33:12; 37:17). At times, when the psalmist felt God was not

following his own rules of justice, they would petition Yahweh for assistance (e.g., 4:1; 5:2; 17:1; 55:1–2; 119:154; 130:2–3) or ask him to rehear a case (e.g., Ps 88), pleading for vindication for themselves (e.g., 26:1) and often ruin for their adversaries (143:11–12).

3. *The Law in Proverbs* (much of this material is taken from G. H. Wilson, “The Words of the Wise’: The Intent and Significance of Qoheleth 12:9–14,” *JBL* [1984]: 175–92; C. M. Carmichael, *The Origins of Biblical Law*, 73)
 - a. Life enjoyed through following God’s commands
 - Prov. 3:1–2. My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. (Cf. Deut. 4:40; 6:1–2)
 - Prov. 6:23. For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life. (Cf. Deut. 4:1; 5:28–29; 8:1–2)
 - Deut. 4:40. Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, that you may prolong your days in the land that Yahweh your God is giving you for all time. Cf. 4:1; 5:29; 6:1–2; 8:1–2.
 - b. “Bind” the commandments on the body
 - Prov. 6:20–23. My son, keep your father’s commandment, and forsake not your mother’s teaching. Bind them on your heart always; tie them around your neck. When you walk, they will lead you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; and when you awake, they will talk with you. For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life.
 - Prov. 7:1–3. My son, keep my words and treasure up my commandments with you; keep my commandments and live; keep my teaching as the apple of your eye; bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.
 - Deut. 6:6–9. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Cf. 11:18–19)
 - c. Two ways
 - Prov. 3:33–35. Yahweh’s curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous. Toward the scorner he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor. The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace.
 - Prov. 4:10–19. Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many.¹¹ I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness.¹² When you walk, your step will not be hampered, and if you run, you will not stumble.¹³ Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.¹⁴ Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil.¹⁵ Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on.¹⁶ For they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.¹⁷ For they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.¹⁸ But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.¹⁹ The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.
 - Prov. 8:32–36. And now, O sons, listen to me: blessed are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from Yahweh, but he who fails to find me injures himself; all who hate me love death.
 - Deut. 11:26–28. See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of Yahweh your God, which I command you today, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of Yahweh your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known.
 - Deut. 30:15–18. See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of Yahweh your God that I command you today, by loving Yahweh your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and Yahweh your God will bless you in the land that you are

entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess.

- d. God as “father” who disciplines the “son” he loves
 - Prov. 3:11–13. My son, do not despise Yahweh’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for Yahweh reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.
 - Deut. 8:5–6. Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, Yahweh your God disciplines you. So you shall keep the commandments of Yahweh your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him. Cf. Deut. 1:30–31.
- e. Possession of the land conditioned on adherence to the righteous path
 - Prov. 2:20–22. So you will walk in the way of the good and keep to the paths of the righteous. For the upright will inhabit the land, and those with integrity will remain in it, but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.
 - Deut. 5:32–33. You shall be careful therefore to do as Yahweh your God has commanded you. You shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the way that Yahweh your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you shall possess.
 - Deut. 30:15–18 (see above).
- f. Specific commands:
 - Deut. 19:14. You shall not move your neighbor’s landmark, which the men of old have set, in the inheritance that you will hold in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess.
 - Prov. 23:10. Do not move an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless.
- g. Wisdom’s role at creation
 - Prov. 3:19–20. Yahweh by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens; but his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds drop down the dew.
 - Prov. 8:22–31. Yahweh possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth, before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. When he established the heavens, I was there; when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man.
- h. The Ten Words Affirmed in Proverbs
 - i. Never take Yahweh’s Name in Vain
 - Prov. 30:8–9. Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, “Who is Yahweh?” or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.
 - ii. Honoring One’s Parents
 - Prov. 1:8. Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching.
 - Prov. 15:5. A fool despises his father’s instruction, but whoever heeds reproof is prudent.
 - Prov. 19:26. He who does violence to his father and chases away his mother is a son who brings shame and reproach. (Cf. 17:21.)
 - Prov. 20:20. If one curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness.
 - Prov. 23:22. Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old.
 - Prov. 30:17. The eye that mocks the father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures.
 - Cf. Sir. 3:1–16.

- iii. Never commit adultery or lust
 - Prov. 6:25–26, 32. The adulterous... Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes; for the price of a prostitute is only a loaf of bread, but a married woman hunts down a precious life.... He who commits adultery lacks sense; he who does it destroys himself.
 - iv. Never bear false witness against your neighbor
 - Prov. 6:19. Yahweh hates... A false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.
 - Prov. 14:25. A truthful witness saves lives, but one who breathes out lies is deceitful.
 - Prov. 19:5. A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will not escape.
 - Prov. 24:28. Be not a witness against your neighbor without cause, and do not deceive with your lips.
 - Prov. 25:18. A man who bears a false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow.
4. *The Law in Job* (Most of this material is adapted from C. B. Ansberry, “‘The Revealed Things’: Deuteronomy and the Epistemology of Job,” in *For Our Good Always*.)
- a. The majority view in the ANE appears to have been that people do *not* know the will of the gods or their requirements. In contrast, Job and his friends have a defined standard for what is right.
 - i. **“Dialog between a man and his god”** (*COS* 1.151: 485): “My Lord, I have debated with myself, and in my feelings [...] of heart: the wrong I did I do not know! Have I [...] a vile forbidden act? Brother does not de[sp]ise his brother, Friend is not calumniator of his friend!”
 - ii. **“Prayer to Every God”** (*ANET* 391–92): “In ignorance I have eaten that forbidden of my god; In ignorance I have set foot on that prohibited by my goddess. O Lord, my transgressions are many; great are my sins.... The transgressions which I have committed, indeed I do not know; The sin which I have done, indeed I do not know. The forbidden thing which I have eaten, indeed I do not know; The prohibited (place) on which I have set foot, indeed I do not know. The lord in the anger of his heart looked at me; The god in the rage of his heart confronted me; When the goddess was angry with me, she made me become ill. The god whom I know or do not know has oppressed me; The goddess whom I know or do not know has placed suffering upon me.... How long, O my goddess, whom I know or do not know, ere thy hostile heart will be quieted? Man is dumb; he knows nothing; Mankind, everyone that exists,—what does he know? Whether he is committing sin or doing good, he does not even know.”
 - iii. **“The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer”** (*COS* 1.153: 487–88): “The lord divines the gods’ inmost thoughts, (But) no [god] understands his behavior. Marduk divines the gods’ inmost thoughts, Which god understands his mind? ... I wish I knew that these things [i.e., libations, good offerings, prostration, supplications and prayers, holy days, festivals] were pleasing to a god! What seems good to one’s self could be an offense to a god, What in one’s own heart seems abominable could be good to one’s god! Who could learn the reasoning of the gods in heaven? Who could grasp the intentions of the gods of the depths? Where might human beings have learned the way of a god?”
 - iv. **“The Babylonian Theodicy”** (*COS* 1.154: 493–94): “*Friend*: You are a mere child, the purpose of the gods is remote as the netherworld.... *Sufferer*: In my youth I tried to find out the will of (my) god, With prayer and supplication I besought my goddess. I bore a yoke of profitless servitude....

Friend: The strategy of a god is [as remote as] innermost heaven, The command of a goddess cannot be dr[awn out].... Divine purpose is as remote as innermost heaven, It is too difficult to understand, people cannot understand it.... Even if one (tries to) apprehend divine intention, people cannot understand it.”

- b. Experience and ancestral tradition, at least some of which may be Scripture (likely from the Pentateuch), appears to shape the presuppositions, rhetorical strategies, and distinctive moral vision of Job and his friends:¹

- i. The three friends:

(1) Assumptions concerning retribution

- Job 8:8–13 (Bildad). For inquire, please, of bygone ages, and consider what the fathers have searched out. ⁹For we are but of yesterday and know nothing, for our days on earth are a shadow. ¹⁰Will they not teach you and tell you and utter words out of their understanding? ¹¹Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh? Can reeds flourish where there is no water? ¹²While yet in flower and not cut down, they wither before any other plant. ¹³Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless shall perish.
- Job 15:17–21 (Eliphaz). I will show you; hear me, and what I have seen I will declare ¹⁸(what wise men have told, without hiding it from their fathers, ¹⁹to whom alone the land was given, and no stranger passed among them). ²⁰The wicked man writhes in pain all his days, through all the years that are laid up for the ruthless. ²¹Dreadful sounds are in his ears; in prosperity the destroyer will come upon him.
- Job 20:4–5, 27–29 (Zophar). Do you not know this from of old, since man was placed on earth, ⁵that the exulting of the wicked is short, and the joy of the godless but for a moment? ... ²⁷The heavens will reveal his iniquity, and the earth will rise up against him. ²⁸The possessions of his house will be carried away, dragged off in the day of God’s wrath. ²⁹This is the wicked man’s portion from God, the heritage decreed for him by God.

(2) Theological anthropology

- Job 15:7–8 (Eliphaz). Are you the first man who was born? Or were you brought forth before the hills? ⁸Have you listened in the council of God? And do you limit wisdom to yourself?
- Job 15:14–16 (Eliphaz). What is man, that he can be pure? Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous? ¹⁵Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens are not pure in his sight; ¹⁶how much less one who is abominable and corrupt, a man who drinks injustice like water!
- Job 25:4–6 (Bildad). How then can man be in the right before God? How can he who is born of woman be pure? ⁵Behold, even the moon is not bright, and the stars are not pure in his eyes; ⁶how much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm!

(3) Knowledge about God and his oversight of the world

- Job 5:8–16 (Eliphaz). As for me, I would seek God, and to God would I commit my cause, ⁹who does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number: ¹⁰he gives rain on the earth and sends waters on the fields; ¹¹he sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety. ¹²He frustrates the devices of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success. ¹³He catches the wise in their own craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end. ¹⁴They meet with darkness in the daytime and grope at noonday as in the night. ¹⁵But he saves the needy from the sword of their mouth and from the hand of the mighty. ¹⁶So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts her mouth.

¹ Along with ancestral tradition, Eliphaz argues that elderly status strengthens one’s claims to knowledge and accentuates the superiority of one’s wisdom (12:11–12; 15:9–10).

- Job 5:17–22 (Eliphaz). Behold, blessed is the one whom God reproves; therefore despise not the discipline of the Almighty. ¹⁸For he wounds, but he binds up; he shatters, but his hands heal. ¹⁹He will deliver you from six troubles; in seven no evil shall touch you. ²⁰In famine he will redeem you from death, and in war from the power of the sword. ²¹You shall be hidden from the lash of the tongue, and shall not fear destruction when it comes. ²²At destruction and famine you shall laugh, and shall not fear the beasts of the earth.
 - Job 8:5–7 (Bildad). If you will seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy, ⁶if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation. ⁷And though your beginning was small, your latter days will be very great.
 - Job 11:13–20 (Zophar). If you prepare your heart, you will stretch out your hands toward him. ¹⁴If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and let not injustice dwell in your tents. ¹⁵Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish; you will be secure and will not fear. ¹⁶You will forget your misery; you will remember it as waters that have passed away. ¹⁷And your life will be brighter than the noonday; its darkness will be like the morning. ¹⁸And you will feel secure, because there is hope; you will look around and take your rest in security. ¹⁹You will lie down, and none will make you afraid; many will court your favor. ²⁰But the eyes of the wicked will fail; all way of escape will be lost to them, and their hope is to breathe their last.
 - 22:21–30 (Eliphaz). Agree with God, and be at peace; thereby good will come to you. ²²Receive instruction from his mouth, and lay up his words in your heart. ²³If you return to the Almighty you will be built up; if you remove injustice far from your tents, ²⁴if you lay gold in the dust, and gold of Ophir among the stones of the torrent-bed, ²⁵then the Almighty will be your gold and your precious silver. ²⁶For then you will delight yourself in the Almighty and lift up your face to God. ²⁷You will make your prayer to him, and he will hear you, and you will pay your vows. ²⁸You will decide on a matter, and it will be established for you, and light will shine on your ways. ²⁹For when they are humbled you say, “It is because of pride”; but he saves the lowly. ³⁰He delivers even the one who is not innocent, who will be delivered through the cleanness of your hands.
- ii. Job is aware of the ancestral tradition used by his friends:
- (1) Job appropriates various traditions to level the rhetorical field and to enhance the authority of his case:
 - (a) Traditional doxologies (9:2–12; 26:5–14)
 - (b) Parables from nature (12:7–10)
 - (c) Proverbs (6:5–6; 14:1–2)
 - (d) Wisdom sayings (7:1–2; 17:5)
 - (2) Job claims to know the traditions propagated by his friends:
 - Job 12:3. But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these?
 - Job 13:2. What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you.
 - Job 16:2. I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all.
 - (3) Job draws on a common ethical code echoed by his friends:
 - Job 22:6–9 (Eliphaz). For you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing and stripped the naked of their clothing. ⁷You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. ⁸The man with power possessed the land, and the favored man lived in it. ⁹You have sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless were crushed.
 - Job 29:11–17 (Job). When the ear heard, it called me blessed, and when the eye saw, it approved, ¹²because I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him. ¹³The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy. ¹⁴I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. ¹⁵I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. ¹⁶I was a father to the needy, and I searched

- out the cause of him whom I did not know. ¹⁷I broke the fangs of the unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth. Cf. 24:2–25 (Job).
- c. There are a number of references to God's words, ways, and commands, which suggests a general grounding in the biblical tradition.
 - Job 6:10. This would be my comfort; I would even exult in pain unsparing, for I have not denied the words of the Holy One.
 - Job 21:14. They say to God, 'Depart from us! We do not desire the knowledge of your ways.
 - Job 22:22. Receive instruction from his mouth, and lay up his words in your heart.
 - Job 23:11–12. My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside. ¹²I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.
 - d. There are a number of references that strongly suggest a link with the Psalms and Israel's wisdom tradition:
 - i. Job's declaration of innocence in ch. 31 resembles the entrance liturgies of the Psalter (Pss. 7:3–5[4–6]; 15; 24:3–6).
 - ii. The path metaphor (Job 31:4, 7), the image of divine surveillance (31:4; cf. Prov. 5:21), and the pervasive use of body parts are distinctive categories of the wisdom movement.
 - iii. Job's concern with sexual ethics (Job 31:1, 9–12; cf. Prov. 5:1–23, 6:20–35, 7:1–27), trust in wealth (Job 31:24–25; cf. Prov. 30:7–9), and social humaneness expressed through kindness toward an enemy (Job 31:29–30; cf. Prov. 25:21–22) all point to the books' grounding in wisdom.
 - e. Job's stress on care for the disenfranchised, judicial impartiality, and kindness toward an enemy are all closely aligned with Israel's constitutional materials in the Pentateuch:
 - i. *Slave rights*, Job 31:13–15 (Exod. 21:18–21, 26–27; Lev 25:6–7; Deut. 5:12–15, 15:12–17, 16:9–15);
 - ii. *Sexual offenses*, Job 31:9–12 (Exod. 20:14, 22:16–17; Lev. 18:17, 20:10);
 - iii. *Enmity*, Job 31:29–30 (Lev. 19:17–18)
 - iv. *Idolatry*, Job 31:26–28 (Exod. 20:3–6, 23; Lev. 19:4; Deut. 4:15–19)
 - v. *Integrity in interpersonal relationships*, Job 31:16–23, 38–40 (Exod. 23:2–8; Lev. 19:11–18);
 - vi. *Covetousness*, Job 31:1 (Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21)
 - f. A number of other features appear to show close dependence on Deuteronomistic thought if not Deuteronomy itself:
 - i. Uncleanliness sticking to one's hand (Job 31:7c with Deut. 13:17a[18a])
 - Job 31:7c. and if any spot has stuck to my hands.
 - Deut. 13:17a[18a]. None of the devoted things shall stick to your hand.
 - ii. The heart being enticed (Job 31:9–12, 26–27 with Deut. 11:16)
 - Job 31:9–12. If my heart has been enticed toward a woman, and I have lain in wait at my neighbor's door, ¹⁰ then let my wife grind for another, and let others bow down on her. ¹¹ For that would be a heinous crime; that would be an iniquity to be punished by the judges; ¹² for that would be a fire that consumes as far as Abaddon, and it would burn to the root all my increase.
 - Job 31:26–27. If I have looked at the sun when it shone, or the moon moving in splendor, ²⁷ and my heart has been secretly enticed, and my mouth has kissed my hand....
 - Deut 11:16. Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them.
 - iii. A devouring fire of judgment that burns to the netherworld (Job 31:12 with Deut. 32:22)

- Job 31:12. For that would be a fire that consumes as far as Abaddon, and it would burn to the root all my increase.
 - Deut. 32:22. For a fire is kindled by my anger, and it burns to the depths of Sheol, devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.
- iv. The celestial bodies as instruments of idolatrous seduction (Job 31:26–27 with Deut. 4:19)
- Job 31:26–27. If I have looked at the sun when it shone, or the moon moving in splendor,²⁷ and my heart has been secretly enticed, and my mouth has kissed my hand....
 - Deut. 4:19. And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that Yahweh your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. Cf. Deut. 17:3; 2 Kgs. 23:5; Jer. 8:1–2.
- v. Stress on the rights of slaves (Job 31:13–15 with Deuteronomy’s version of the Sabbath command [Deut. 5:14–15], lavish economic provision for the indentured servant at the time of release [15:12–15], invitations for marginalized members of the community to participate in the cultic life of the nation [12:12, 18; 16:11, 14; 31:12], and asylum given to runaway slaves [23:15]).
- Job 31:13–15. If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant, when they brought a complaint against me,¹⁴ what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him?¹⁵ Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?
- vi. Loving care for the destitute and day laborer (Job 31:16–23, 38–40 with Deut. 10:17–18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19–21; 26:12–13; 27:19).
- Job 31:16–23. If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail,¹⁷ or have eaten my morsel alone, and the fatherless has not eaten of it¹⁸ (for from my youth the fatherless grew up with me as with a father, and from my mother’s womb I guided the widow),¹⁹ if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or the needy without covering,²⁰ if his body has not blessed me, and if he was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep,²¹ if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, because I saw my help in the gate,²² then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket.²³ For I was in terror of calamity from God, and I could not have faced his majesty.
 - Job 31:38–40. If my land has cried out against me and its furrows have wept together,³⁹ if I have eaten its yield without payment and made its owners breathe their last,⁴⁰ let thorns grow instead of wheat, and foul weeds instead of barley.
 - Deut. 10:17–18. For Yahweh your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe.¹⁸ He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.
- vii. Economic dealings with employees (Job 31:38–40 with Deut. 24:14–15)
- Job 31:38–40. If my land has cried out against me and its furrows have wept together,³⁹ if I have eaten its yield without payment and made its owners breathe their last,⁴⁰ let thorns grow instead of wheat, and foul weeds instead of barley.
 - Deut. 24:14–15. You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns.¹⁵ You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to Yahweh, and you be guilty of sin.
- g. Conclusion: The author of Job drew not only on broad wisdom traditions but also directly from the Pentateuchal materials, which suggests both an organic connection between wisdom and law but also the covenantal nature of Israel’s wisdom writings.

B. The Covenant as the Context for Wisdom (Some of this material is adapted from J. A. Grant, “Wisdom and Covenant,” in *DOTWPPW*, 858–62.)

1. While the term “covenant” (*bʿrît*) is rare in Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes (see only Job 5:23; 31:1; 40:28; Prov. 2:17), the covenant relationship provides the context for understanding Israelite wisdom and for living life well. To forsake wisdom and pursue the way of the fool is to forget “the covenant of ... God” (Prov 2:17).
2. Foundational to all wisdom is “the fear of Yahweh/God,” which shows that wisdom is linked to relationship with the covenant God. In the words of R. C. Van Leeuwen (“The Book of Proverbs,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 5:33): “The great phrase ‘the fear of the LORD’ grounds human knowledge and wisdom (cf. [Prov] 9:10) in humble service of Yahweh. Although this phrase has its origin in the experience of God’s numinous majesty (as at Sinai, Deut 4:9–10), it eventually has come to express the total claim of God upon humans and the total life-response of humans to God.”
 - a. According to the Pentateuch, the generator of all covenantal faithfulness is fear of Yahweh (Gen. 22:12; Exod. 20:20; Deut. 10:12–13; 31:12–13).
 - Gen. 22:12. [The angel of Yahweh] said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”
 - Exod. 20:20. Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”
 - Deut. 10:12–13. And now, Israel, what does Yahweh your God require of you, but to fear Yahweh your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul,¹³ and to keep the commandments and statutes of Yahweh, which I am commanding you today for your good?
 - Deut. 31:12–13. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law,¹³ and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. Cf. 6:1–2; 17:18–20.
 - b. While the old covenant commanded the fear of the Lord, the new covenant both requires and supplies it.
 - Jer 32:39–40. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may *fear* me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them.⁴⁰ I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the *fear* of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.
 - Eph 6:5. Slaves, obey your earthly masters with *fear and trembling*, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ.
 - Phil 2:12–13. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with *fear and trembling*,¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.
 - Heb 12:28–29. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with *reverence and awe*,²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.
 - c. Rebels are those who do not fear God.
 - Ps 36:1. Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes.
 - Ps 56:19. God will give ear [to the cry of the righteous] and humble [the wicked, he who is enthroned from of old, because they do not change and do not fear God.]⁷
 - Rom 3:18. There is no fear of God before their eyes.
 - d. The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7; Eccl. 12:13).
 - Prov. 1:7. The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
 - Eccl. 12:13. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

- e. The structure of Proverbs is bracketed by statements addressing the centrality of fearing and/or knowing Yahweh, the main units of the book being Prov. 1–9, 10–31.
 - Prov. 1:7. The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
 - Prov. 9:10. The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of Holy One(s) is insight.
 - Prov 30:3. I have not learned wisdom, but knowledge of Holy One(s) I know.
 - Prov. 31:30. Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears Yahweh is to be praised.
 - f. The entire issue in Job addresses the basis for fearing God.
 - Job 1:1, 9–10. There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil....⁹Then the Satan answered Yahweh and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? ¹⁰Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.
 - Job 28:28. And [God] said to man, “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.”
 - g. The fear of Yahweh synthesizes the principal human response to life’s enigmas in Ecclesiastes.
 - Ecc. 3:14. I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.
 - Ecc. 5:8. If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.
 - Ecc. 8:12. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.
 - Ecc. 8:13. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.
 - Ecc. 12:13. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.
3. Removing the covenant makes biblical wisdom nonsensical.
- a. The main tension point in Job revolves around people’s expectations of God that are not met, all grounded in an incomplete covenantal understanding of retribution (blessing and curse). The narrator, Job, and Yahweh all affirm that Job’s suffering was not due to his own (covenantal) failures (Job 1:1, 8; ch. 31; 42:7–8), which leads Job to reflect on the days when he enjoyed God’s close covenantal relationship—“the friendship of God was upon my tent, when the Almighty was yet with me” (29:4–5)—and to justify himself rather than to affirm God’s right to act as he will (32:2; cf. 36:3–4, 22–23). As J. A. Grant has asserted, “The essence of [Job’s] complaint is based in the understanding that God had not kept his side of the ‘covenant deal’” (*DOTWPPW*, 862).
 - b. In Ecclesiastes, the Preacher’s crisis of faith was partially grounded in the fact that he expected justice and meaning in the ordering of life’s patterns. Central to the covenant between God and his people was the structure of righteousness and justice, and it is the lack of the expected relationship between the Creator and his creation that leads the Preacher to view life as so enigmatic.
 - c. The sages in Proverbs identify that the normal pattern of life is that honoring God with one’s life leads to positive real consequences. This is a covenantal pattern of retribution.

C. Covenantal Retribution Theology and the Act-Consequence Nexus (Some of this material is adapted from E. C. Lucas, “Wisdom Theology,” *DOTWPPW*, 907–909.)

1. In 1955, K. Koch (“Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?” in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. J. L. Crenshaw [London: SPCK, 1983]: 57–87; orig. German, 1955) described what he called “an act-consequence nexus” in Proverbs and other parts of the OT. The assumption is that wicked actions bring disastrous consequences, whereas good actions result in blessing. This act-consequence nexus is clearly *part* of Israel’s wisdom tradition, for it is expressed in a number of proverbs, is assumed by Job’s three friends as the only pattern for God’s actions in the present, and stands behind the great frustrations of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes when he asserts that life makes little sense.
 - Job 4:8. As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same.
 - Prov. 22:8–9. Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of his fury will fail. ⁹Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor.
 - Prov. 26:27. Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling.
 - Prov. 28:10. Whoever misleads the upright into an evil way will fall into his own pit, but the blameless will have a goodly inheritance.
 - Prov. 28:18. Whoever walks in integrity will be delivered, but he who is crooked in his ways will suddenly fall.

Koch argued that the act-consequence nexus was grounded in natural inevitability and not the result of God’s direct oversight. He held that while the Lord upholds the act-consequence nexus, ensuring that it is completed, it should not be viewed as God’s administering (covenantal) punishments or rewards. Koch’s comments address complex issues and deserve a thoughtful response.
2. In contrast to Koch, the Bible is clear that that the act-consequence nexus is *not* rooted in an impersonal order but is directly related to the character and will of God.
 - a. The “abomination sayings” show that wise living is directly related to what delights or abhors Yahweh.
 - Prov. 11:20. Those of crooked heart are an abomination to Yahweh, but those of blameless ways are his delight.
 - b. The fear of the LORD is the very context for wise living, which highlights how the act-consequence nexus is directly related to relationship with God.
 - Prov. 15:33. The fear of Yahweh is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor.
 - Job 28:28. Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.
 - c. Abraham linked the act-consequence nexus directly to God’s character.
 - Gen. 18:24–25. Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? ²⁵Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?
3. The inter-relationship of God-ordained acts and consequences, however, is difficult to assess, for whereas the covenantal blessings and curses are initially portrayed as absolutes (obedience brings blessings and disobedience, curse; see Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28), the act-consequence nexus is *not* absolute (at least in this life), for the wicked often enjoy plenty and ease and the righteous often suffer.
 - a. Wisdom distinguishes two ways: the way of the wise and the way of the fool, the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked (see Psalm 1). While recognizing that none are perfect, Israel’s wisdom tradition also affirms that, in light of God’s just ability to forgive sin, there were imperfect people in both the Old and New

Testaments whom God considered righteous covenant keepers, all by grace through faith.

- Gen. 6:8–9. But Noah found favor/grace in the eyes of Yahweh. ⁹These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God.
- Job 1:1, 8; 2:3. There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.... ⁸ And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” ... ^{2:3} And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason.”
- Ps. 25:8–15. Good and upright is Yahweh; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. ⁹He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. ¹⁰All the paths of Yahweh are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies. ¹¹For your name’s sake, O Yahweh, pardon my guilt, for it is great. ¹²Who is the man who fears Yahweh? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose. ¹³His soul shall abide in well-being, and his offspring shall inherit the land. ¹⁴The friendship of Yahweh is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant. ¹⁵My eyes are ever toward Yahweh, for he will pluck my feet out of the net. [As I will argue in the Psalms lecture, I believe this text actually points to Christ and not to any OT saint.]
- Rom. 2:13, 26–29. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.... ²⁶So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ²⁸For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.
- 1 John 3:7. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.

- b. What is striking, therefore, is that, while Proverbs and elsewhere affirm the general truth of the act-consequence nexus for today, they also rightly note that the principle of “you reap what you sow” has many exceptions *in this life*.
- i. The “better than” proverbs clearly show that a simple act-consequence nexus does not always hold up in the present.
 - Prov. 16:8. Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice.
 - Prov. 16:16. How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.
 - Prov. 16:19. It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud.
 - ii. A number of other proverbs simply declare explicitly that, in this cursed age, the righteous do not always prosper and that the wicked sometimes do.
 - Prov. 11:16. A gracious woman gets honor, and violent men get riches.
 - Prov. 13:23. The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.
 - Prov. 18:23. The poor use entreaties, but the rich answer roughly.
 - iii. The “less fitting” and “number” proverbs declare the same thing—this life does not always work out according to the harvester’s principle of “you reap what you sow.”
 - Prov. 17:7. Fine speech is not becoming to a fool; still less is false speech to a prince.
 - Prov. 19:10. It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury, much less for a slave to rule over princes.
 - Prov. 30:21–23. Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up: ²²a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when he is filled with food; ²³an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maidservant when she displaces her mistress.

- iv. The fact that life is filled with apparent “contradictions” cautions all readers from mechanically treating all proverbs as absolute principles that work in every situation. Indeed, in alignment with the very nature of the proverb, most biblical proverbs are short, pithy statements that mark general truths in most settings rather than absolute truths for all settings. This fact is made clear in Prov. 26:4–5, which states apparent contradicting statements as equally valid, dependent on the circumstance:
 - Prov. 26:4–5. Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.
⁵Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.
 - c. Similarly, part of the author’s intent in the book of Job appears to be to counter the false assumption that the act-consequence nexus explains all of God’s dealings with mankind in the present.
 - i. The core of Job’s argument against his three friends is that they misappropriated the act-consequence nexus, treating it as the only guide for this life and failing to account for God’s greater purposes.
 - Job 4:8. As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same.
 - ii. Whereas most proverbs reason from cause to effect (a certain situation or action is likely to lead to a particular outcome), Job’s friends reason from effect to cause (Job must have sinned because he is experiencing great suffering), which is apparently not appropriate reasoning in a twisted world (cf. John 9:1–3).²
 - d. Finally, the Preacher in Ecclesiastes is troubled over the fact that the act-consequence does not always work out in this age (Eccl. 8:14)—a sentiment echoed by the psalmist (Ps. 44:17–19).
 - Eccl. 8:14. There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.
 - Ps. 44:17–19. All this [turmoil] has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you, and we have not been false to your covenant. ¹⁸Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way; ¹⁹yet you have broken us in the place of jackals and covered us with the shadow of death.
4. Conclusions:
- a. The presence of an act-consequence nexus in Israel’s wisdom tradition seems best explained by wisdom’s covenantal context, both the national covenant made to Moses (blessings and curses) and the global one made with all mankind in Adam (Isa. 24:4–6; cf. 43:27; Hos. 6:7).
 - b. God is always just (Job 37:23), and his covenantal promises of blessing and curse must be seen as absolute truths, for redemptive history hinges on God’s faithfulness to these promises in Christ (Deut. 4:25–31; 30:1–10; Gal. 3:13–14).

² A SIDE QUESTION: Elihu as well appears to hold to the act-consequence nexus. His name means “my God is Yahweh,” and it is the only Hebrew name in the book. This along with his positive defense of Yahweh and the fact that his words are never critiqued by Yahweh (like the three friends’ words are) suggests that Elihu is a good guy, speaking truth about God (in contrast to Job’s friends—see Job 42:7). How then do we grasp the meaning of his words, for he appears to affirm the main voice of the three friends when he states, “For according to the work of a man [God] will repay him, and according to his ways he will make it befall him” (Job 34:11). Similarly, in Job 36:6–14 we read: “He does not keep the wicked alive, but gives the afflicted their right. ⁷He does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous, but with kings on the throne he sets them forever, and they are exalted. ⁸And if they are bound in chains and caught in the cords of affliction, ⁹then he declares to them their work and their transgressions, that they are behaving arrogantly. ¹⁰He opens their ears to instruction and commands that they return from iniquity. ¹¹If they listen and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness. ¹²But if they do not listen, they perish by the sword and die without knowledge. ¹³The goddess in heart cherish anger; they do not cry for help when he binds them. ¹⁴They die in youth, and their life ends among the cult prostitutes.”

- c. Nevertheless, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes all stress that covenantal retribution theology is more complex than may first appear. This complexity is likely caused by theological realities associated with (1) the imperfections of all God's covenant partners before Christ, (2) the doctrine of imputation, and (3) the already but not yet aspect of a Christian's life with God.
- i. First, while there appears to be both individual and communal aspects to the covenantal blessings and curses, humanity's imperfect obedience of faith and the typological, imperfect realities of OT sacrifices and temple worship made God's curse ever-justified and his blessing ever-gracious (i.e., unmerited), supplied only by his loving kindness in light of past promises to the fathers and future grace shown in Christ. Imputed righteousness alone is the basis (though not the sole condition) for all blessing in both the old and new covenants. The experience of this imputation, however, does impart fresh workings of grace that enable in the present age a real, though not perfect, obedience, which can meet necessary conditions for covenantal blessing.
 - ii. Second, while believers are redeemed from the curse as condemnation for sin, we have yet to be delivered from the cursed age with all its temptations, decay, and death. As saved sinners in need of sanctification, the Lord uses the cursed world as discipline to develop holiness: "He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity" (Job 36:15; cf. Heb. 12:10–11). The Job 36:15 reference, however, still assumes that the affliction itself was brought on due to sin (36:6–14).
 - iii. Third, while believers stand fully righteous in Christ and thus have secured every spiritual blessing now and the full inheritance (including physical blessing) later (Eph. 1:3, 13–14), we are still called to pursue gain through God-dependent obedience, allowing the promises of God to motivate us toward God-likeness and away from sin (2 Pet. 1:4; cf. 2 Cor. 7:1; 1 John 3:3). The obedience itself is fruit, not root, and proves that we are indeed in Christ and living by future-oriented faith.
 - iv. The book of Psalms clearly asserts that the act-consequence nexus has an *eschatological nature*, finding its ultimate fulfillment only at the last judgment and beyond.
 - (1) For example, in Psalm 1 we read: "Blessed/satisfied is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked ... but his delight is in the law of Yahweh.... The wicked are not so but are like chaff that the wind drives away. *Therefore* the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for Yahweh knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." The act-consequence nexus expressed in "the wicked . . . are like chaff that the wind drives away" provides the basis for the conviction that "the wicked will not stand in the judgment." The act-consequence nexus therefore addresses *ultimate* realities, which are not always clearly perceived in the present.
 - (2) This fact is stressed in Ps. 49:18–19, where we learn that though the wicked man in this age "counts himself blessed . . . his soul will go to the generation of his fathers, who will never again see light." The same context highlights that for the righteous there is hope "over dying/beyond death" (Ps. 48:14), for darkness will pass and "morning" will dawn as God receives his saint "from the power of Sheol" (49:14–15).

- (3) The entirety of Psalm 37 connects the eschatological nature of the act-consequence to blessings and curses, using language that echoes the covenant. It opens in vv. 1–2 by urging the reader: “Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers! ² For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb.” We then read in vv. 21–22: “The wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives; ²² for those blessed by Yahweh shall inherit the land, but those cursed by him shall be cut off.” The language of the wicked being “cut off” echoes the verb *krt* used for making a covenant and is repeated in vv. 9, 28, 34, 38.
- (4) References to God’s ultimate covenantal blessing for the righteous fill the Psalms, usually expressed in the context of hope out of struggle or tribulation, though some speak as if covenantal blessing will be enjoyed in the immediate present (e.g., Ps. 128:4).
- (a) In Ps. 109:26–31, a text that clearly addresses the eschatological nature of retribution theology, we read in v. 28: “Let them curse, but you will bless! They arise and are put to shame, but your servant will be glad!” David cries, “Salvation belongs to Yahweh; your blessing be on your people!” (Ps. 3:8[9]). Similarly, in the wake of external persecution, David declared in Ps. 5:11–12[12–13]: “But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you. ¹² For you bless the righteous, O Yahweh; you cover him with favor as with a shield.” And again in 28:8–9: “Yahweh is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed. ⁹ Oh, save your people and bless your heritage! Be their shepherd and carry them forever.” Comparable declarations of hope are found in Pss. 21:3, 6[4, 7]; 24:5; 29:11; 67:1, 6–7[2, 7–8]; 115:12–15; 129:8; 133:3; 134:3.
- (b) Psalm 112 places the unshakable future for the righteous in the context of covenantal retribution theology. Echoing Psalm 1, it begins in 112:1–2: “Praise Yahweh! Blessed/satisfied is the man who fears Yahweh, who greatly delights in his commandments! ² His offspring will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed.” Similarly, in Psalm 119 the act-consequence nexus is echoed in covenantal curse terms when the psalmist declares in vv. 20–21: “My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times. ²¹ You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones, who wander from your commandments.”
- (c) Both Pss. 65:10 and 107:38 point to God’s causing rain to fall and crops to grow as (covenantal) blessing, and 67:6[7] sees the reality of such provision as a ground of hope that God will indeed uphold his people and bless them.
- (d) Ps. 72:17 alludes to the Abrahamic promise of Gen. 12:3 by pointing to the Davidic Son as the one through whom the world will enjoy the blessing of covenantal reconciliation with God. Comparably, in Ps. 132:13–18, the Lord affirms that he will bless Jerusalem (v. 15) with provision, salvation, the Davidic king, and triumph (cf. 147:13).

- (5) For other examples of psalms that directly address retribution theology in eschatological terms, see Pss. 9:17–18; 10:17–18; 17:13–15; 30:5; 34:19–22; ch. 49; 68:2–3, 20; ch. 73; 92:6–11; ch. 94; 102:18–28.
- d. Job’s three friends forced the act-consequence/blessing-curse nexus to always hold true in this life. Those who follow this path may either have an over-realized eschatology or fail to see how God’s kindness shown in physical health and wealth may ultimately be a curse in disguise, operating as a means for God’s “giving one over into sin” (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28) and serving as exhibit “A” against those who fail to honor God and give thanks to him (1:21). As Paul said in Rom 2:4–5: “Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.”
- i. With respect to those expecting too much in the present (i.e., an over-realized eschatology), in this present cursed world, physical blessing seen in health and wealth is often delayed. Nevertheless, the call to walk in wisdom and promise of God’s presence and help remains, and God, who is always just, will *ultimately* punish the wicked and uphold the righteous.
- Ps. 73. ³For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ⁴For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. ⁵They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.... ¹⁶But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, ¹⁷until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. ¹⁸Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. ¹⁹How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! ²⁰Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.... ²³Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. ²⁴You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. ²⁵Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. ²⁶My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. ²⁷For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. ²⁸But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord Yahweh my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.
 - Prov. 1:18–19, 32–33. But these men lie in wait for their own blood; they set an ambush for their own lives. ¹⁹ Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain; it takes away the life of its possessors.... ³² For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them; ³³ but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.
 - Prov. 11:21. Be assured, an evil person will not go unpunished, but the offspring of the righteous will be delivered.
 - Prov. 24:19–20. Fret not yourself because of evildoers, and be not envious of the wicked, ²⁰for the evil man has no future; the lamp of the wicked will be put out.
 - Eccl. 2:11–13. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. ¹²So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. ¹³Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.
 - Eccl. 8:12–13. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. ¹³But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.
- ii. Furthermore, just as covenant “curses” can serve as blessings-in-disguise, that nurture holiness, for those who are able to learn from them (see Lev. 26:18, 21, 23, 27; Amos 4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12; Heb. 12:10–11), so too

“blessings” can operate as instruments of judgment for those who fail to recognize God’s kindness and praise him for it.

- Rom. 1:18, 21, 23, 26, 28. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth....²¹For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him....²³Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity....²⁶... God gave them up to dishonorable passions....²⁸... God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.
- Rom. 2:4–5. Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?⁵But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.
- Rom. 11:20–22. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear.²¹For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you.²²Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.