

INTERPRETING OLD TESTAMENT WISDOM THROUGH CHRIST AND FOR CHRIST

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I. Foundational principles:

A. God is the source of wisdom (Group #1).

1. Job 28:20–27. 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.
2. Prov 8:22–23, 30–31. The LORD 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.... 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.
3. Eccl 12:11. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.

B. For humans, all biblical wisdom begins with fearing God (Group #2).

1. Job 28:28. And [the LORD] said to man, “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.”
2. Prov 1:7. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
3. Prov 9:10. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One(s) is insight.
4. Eccl 12:13–14. 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. Humans should humbly seek wisdom through instruction and prayer (Group #3).

1. Prov 2:1–8. My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For Yahweh gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound

wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints.

2. Prov 8:32–35. 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.
3. Ecccl 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?
4. 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. 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. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

D. True wisdom is found in Christ and stands against the wisdom of the world (Group #4).

1. 1 Cor 1:17–18, 20–24, 30. For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.... Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.... And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.
2. Col 2:1–3. For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
3. 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. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

II. Definition: Wisdom is about truth and order in God’s world. 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, are to do the same as his representatives (Gen 1:27–28). Humans enjoy wisdom only through Christ, who embodies wisdom for us.

III. Types and formats of wisdom

A. OT books: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes

B. Types:

1. Speculative wisdom: analyzing what is right and wrong (Job, Ecclesiastes)
2. Prudential wisdom: considering what can make life better (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes)

C. Formats:

1. Monologue: Presentation only of what is right and wrong (Job, Proverbs 1–9, Ecclesiastes)
2. Dialogue: Presentation and response of what is right and wrong (Job)
3. Proverb: Pithy statements that attempt to capture in general ways what is right and wrong (Proverbs 10–31, Ecclesiastes)

IV. Interpreting a Wisdom Dialogue—Job 1–2 (Act 1: Prologue)

A. Setting (1:1–5): Job’s piety (v. 1), progeny (v. 2), possessions (v. 3), and pattern (vv. 4–5)

B. Scene 1 (1:6–22)

1. Heavenly confrontation (1:6–13)
 - a. 1:8–9. 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?” Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason?”
2. Test 1: Job’s loss (1:14–22)
 - a. The nature of Job’s loss: (1) foreigners from the south cattle and slay servants (vv. 14–15); (2) fire consumes sheep and servants (v. 16); (3) foreigners steal camels and slay servants (v. 17); (4) wind destroys house, killing children (vv. 18–19)
 - b. Job’s response: 1:20–22. Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.
 - c. God is sovereign over evil, which he works to his own ends.

- i. Isa 45:7. I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things.
- ii. Cf. 2 Sam 24:1 vs. 1 Chr 21:1
- iii. 2 Cor 12:7. So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

C. Scene 2 (2:1–13)

- 1. Heavenly confrontation (2:1–6)
 - a. 2:3–6. 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.” Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life.”
- 2. Test 2: Job’s physical illness (2:7–10)
 - a. 2:7–10. So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes. Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.” But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

V. Interpreting Some Wisdom Monologues

A. Eccl 3:9–14

- 1. There is beauty in everything but also ignorance of God’s purposes (3:9–11).
- 2. In response, mankind must rejoice in God’s gifts and fear him (3:12–14).

B. Eccl 11:7–12:1

- 1. The need to maintain God-honoring joy (11:7–8): seeing the sun is sweet (11:7) because it sustains God-honoring joy even through days of darkness (11:8).

2. A method for maintaining God-honoring joy (11:9–12:7): choose joy (11:9ab), walk circumspectly (11:9cd), cast away cares (11:10ab), remember your creator (11:11–12:7).

VI. Interpreting Proverbs

A. A Proverb Test

Fig. 22.1. Sample Modern Proverbs

1. A bird in the hand ...	is worth two in the bush.	21. If you can't stand the heat ...	get out of the kitchen.
2. A chain is no stronger ...	than its weakest link.	22. If you play with fire ...	you're going to get burned.
3. A leopard cannot ...	change its spots.	23. Lightning never strikes ...	the same place twice.
4. A penny saved ...	is a penny earned.	24. Nice guys ...	finish last.
5. A stitch in time ...	saves nine.	25. No news is ...	good news.
6. Actions speak ...	louder than words.	26. If you can't beat 'em ...	join 'em.
7. Birds of a feather ...	flock together.	27. Rome was not built ...	in a day.
8. Don't bite off more ...	than you can chew.	28. When the going gets tough ...	the tough get going.
9. Don't change horses ...	midstream.	29. Strike while ...	the iron is hot.
10. Don't count your chickens ...	before their hatched.	30. The bigger they are ...	the harder they fall.
11. Don't cry ...	over spilled milk.	31. The early bird ...	catches the worm.
12. Don't judge a book ...	by its cover.	32. The grass is always ...	greener on the other side.
13. Don't put all your eggs ...	in one basket.	33. The pen is ...	mightier than the sword.
14. Don't put the cart ...	before the horse.	34. The road to hell is ...	paved with good intentions.
15. Don't throw the baby ...	out with the bath water.	35. The rotten apple ...	spoil the whole barrel.
16. Every cloud has ...	a silver lining.	36. The squeaking wheel ...	gets the oil.
17. Give someone an inch ...	and they'll take a mile.	37. There's more than one way ...	to skin a cat.

18. If a thing is worth doing ...	it's worth doing well.	38. Two wrongs ...	don't make a right.
19. If at first you don't succeed ...	try, try again.	39. Waste not ...	want not.
20. People who live in glass houses ...	shouldn't throw stones.	40. Sticks and stones may break my bones ...	but words will never hurt me.

1. Grade:

- a. 31–40 = Proverbial Genius
- b. 21–30 = Proverbially Bright
- c. 11–20 = Proverbially Dull
- d. 0–10 = Proverbially Challenged

2. What's a proverb?

- a. Proverbs supply memorable bites of truth.
- b. Most proverbs are pithy, memorable, and poetic.¹
 - “Look before you leap” vs. “In advance of committing yourself to a course of action, consider your circumstances.”
 - “A stitch in time saves nine” vs. “There are certain corrective measures for minor problems that, when taken early on in a course of action, forestall major problems from arising.”
- c. The briefer a statement is, the less likely it is to be totally precise and universally applicable.

B. Consider what truth the proverb is communicating.

1. *Generalizations*: Some proverbs work only in some situations.

- a. Often proverbs present contradictory perspectives, and each proverb is correct *in given situations*.² Examples from English proverbs:
 - “Birds of a feather flock together” vs. “Opposites attract.”
 - “Too many cooks spoil the broth” vs. “Two heads are better than one.”
 - “He who hesitates is lost” vs. “Look before you leap.”
 - “A Bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” vs. “A man's reach should exceed his grasp.”
- b. The fact that life is filled with apparent “contradictions” cautions all readers from mechanically treating all proverbs as absolute principles that work in every

¹ Both examples taken from Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 232–33.

² Examples taken from Walton and Hill, *Old Testament Today*, 379.

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. The wise person knows which advise is best to follow in any given situation.

- Prov 26:4–5. Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.”
- c. Solomon captured the purpose of a proverb when he wrote, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Prov 25:11). In contrast, when proverbs are applied in the wrong context, we get something far less beautiful:
- Prov 26:7. Like a lame man’s legs, which hang useless, is a proverb in the mouth of fools.
 - Prov 26:9. Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of fools.
2. *Absolutes*: Proverbs that are always true because they express truths about the unchanging God. Absolute proverbs relate to God’s unchanging character and sovereign action (16:1, 4; 19:21; 21:30) or his unswerving disposition or response toward human will or action (10:25, 27; 11:20; 13:21; 16:5; 28:14); what is not absolute is the cause-effect of humanity’s circumstantial existence (16:31; 22:8). While divine justice and the realities of blessing and curse may not be apparent from the short-view, in the long-view we can be absolutely confident that God will be faithful.
- a. Prov 11:20. Those of crooked heart are an abomination to the LORD; but those of blameless ways are his delight.
 - b. Prov 16:1. The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD.
 - c. Prov 16:4–5. The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble. Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the LORD; be assured, he will not go unpunished.
 - d. Prov 19:21. Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.
 - e. Prov 21:30. No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD.
 - f. *Monologue*: 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.
 - g. *Monologue*: Ecc 7:13–14. Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

3. *Ultimate, eschatological truths*: Many proverbs address ultimate, eschatological truths and not immediate truths.
- a. Proverbs that foretell are *not* promises for the present age but are true observations that time will indeed bear out unless God intervenes for good or ill. The particular blessing, rewards, and opportunities mentioned in proverbs are *likely* to follow in this life, but they are not legal guarantees from God. Nevertheless, it is likely that the sages who penned proverbs were already thinking eschatologically, pointing to ultimate, consummate truths when considered from an eternal perspective.
 - Prov 10:25, 27. When the tempest passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous is established forever.... The fear of the LORD prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be short.
 - Prov 13:21. Disaster pursues sinners, but the righteous are rewarded with good.
 - Prov 22:8–9. Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of his fury will fail. Whoever 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.
 - b. While Proverbs and other books 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*.
 - 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.
 - *Monologue*: 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.
 - c. 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.

- Prov 1:18–19, 32–33. But these men lie in wait for their own blood; they set an ambush for their own lives. Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain; it takes away the life of its possessors.... For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them; 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, for the evil man has no future; the lamp of the wicked will be put out.
- *Monologue*: 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. 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.

C. Let the proverb move you to fear God and treasure Christ as your wisdom.

1. The king is the primary agent of wisdom, and the book clarifies what the life of the ultimate nobleman, King Jesus, will be like.
 - a. The wisdom of Solomon (1:1; 10:1; 25:1)
 - b. The wisdom of David through his son (4:1–9)
 - c. The wisdom for the royal son(s): “my son(s)” (1:8, 10; 2:1; 3:1, 21; 4:1, 10, 20; 5:1; 6:1, 20; 7:1)
2. God made the world through wisdom (Prov 8:22–31; cf. 3:19–20).
 - a. Wisdom was the beginning of God’s way (8:22)
 - b. Before creation, God appointed wisdom his representative (8:23–26; cf. Ps 2:6).
 - c. At creation, wisdom was beside God operating as his joyful craftsman (8:27–31)
 - d. Wisdom stands with Yahweh as one of the “Holy Ones,” the knowledge of whom supplies insight (9:10).
3. God’s Son is wisdom (Prov 30:1–6).
 - a. Agur speaks an “oracle” (30:1), which stands as God’s word that proves true (30:5); this “oracle of the man” recalls Num 24:3, 15 and 2 Sam 23:1, both messianic predictions.
 - b. The oracle relates to a proper knowledge of the Holy *Ones* (30:3; cf. 9:10).

- c. He queries, “Who has ascended to heaven and come down? Who has gathered the wind in his fists? Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son’s name? Surely you know!” (Prov 30:4).
 - d. In light of the parallels with Prov 8:22–31, God’s “Son” is wisdom. But God’s “son” is also David’s son (2 Sam 7:14; cf. Ps 2:7).
 - e. If God is the source of wisdom, and his Son is wisdom, and the king embodies wisdom, we are in a place to see Jesus as the very image of God, the royal Son who stands as the embodiment of wisdom.
4. Christ’s wisdom is shown in his teaching, greater than Solomon’s, and proven by his deeds of power (Matt 11:2, 19; 12:42; 13:54). Through Christ right order is reestablished in God’s world, so the cross becomes the pinnacle of wisdom in salvation history (1 Cor 1:22–24, 30).
- a. Matt 11:2, 19. Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples.... [Jesus said,] “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”
 - b. Matt 12:42. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.
 - c. Matt 13:54. And coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?”
 - d. 1 Cor 1:22–24, 30. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.... And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.