2 The Scope of Wisdom Literature
TREMPER LONGMAN III

What is the scope of wisdom literature in the Bible? Is there a category of biblical literature that we might designate ‘wisdom literature’, and if so, what books or texts might be included in that group? How far does the label ‘wisdom’ extend in the Bible? At the present moment, scholarly answers to these questions are diverse. While in recent decades most scholars would recognise a core group of three books within the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (OT/HB) – Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes – and two deuterocanonical books – Wisdom of Solomon and Ben Sira – other scholars dispute this designation and challenge the idea that ‘wisdom literature’ is anything more than a scholarly construct first created in the mid-nineteenth century.

Among those who believe that there is a core group, a further debate is whether the designation might include other books or passages within other books of the OT/HB beyond the core group. Scholars have contended, for example, that various psalms be designated ‘wisdom psalms’. Others would also include the Song of Songs. Some portions of historical books have also been nominated for membership, most notably the account of the Fall (Genesis 3), the Joseph narrative (Genesis 37–50), the Succession Narrative (2 Samuel 9–20; 1 Kings 1–2), the book of Esther and the stories found in Daniel 1–6. Still others would include various prophets or parts of prophetic books. In addition, there is a vibrant discussion of the relationship between law and wisdom, particularly centring on a passage like Deut 4:4–8, which clearly intertwines law with the concept of wisdom. With the growing awareness of the role of scribes in the final production of biblical books, there is also the possibility of the sapientialisation of entire books. But

at this point the question can be and has been raised, ‘if Wisdom can mean anything and everything, then it means nothing’.  

However, paradoxically, some of these same scholars have seen wisdom literature as not only permeating the OT/HB but also as a distinct group with its own worldview. Indeed, these scholars argue that wisdom literature produces a theology which is distant from, even ‘alien’ to or a ‘foreign corpus’ among, the other traditions found in the OT/HB. These researchers have noted an absence of reference in these core books to redemptive history, like the patriarchs or the exodus, or to the covenant. In addition, they argue, those who produced the wisdom literature did not get their message directly from God (via revelation) but rather through tradition, observation and experience. And furthermore, they are struck by the similarity and openness of the sages, whom they believe produced Proverbs in particular, to the thinking of Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Aramaic wisdom teachers.

To illustrate these different schools of thought, we will focus on representative thinkers of the past half century. We will move from more traditional scholars, those who argue that there is a distinct category that can be designated wisdom, to those who question and even apparently reject the idea that there is such a genre. We will then offer a way forward that recognises a genre of wisdom literature as a viable, but not exclusive, categorisation.

TRADITIONAL VIEW OF WISDOM

The Genre of Wisdom
What we are calling the ‘traditional view’ of wisdom literature was the dominant view held by scholars working in the area of wisdom from at least the end of World War II up to the turn of the millennium. Some specialists still hold this view, at least in general, and many who are not engaged in research or on the cutting edge of studies in this area still hold some form of this view as a default position. Of course, even

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3 Harmut Gese, *Lehre und Wirklichkeit in der alten Weisheit* [Tübingen, 1958]. His term is ‘Fremdkörper’.

among the scholars cited here, there was not complete unanimity on all issues, but what I hope to provide is an accurate representation of the thought of the majority of scholars who represent this general perspective on the question of the extent of wisdom literature. In the process, we will also discover that the answer to the scope of wisdom literature also feeds a particular understanding of the nature of wisdom literature, both of which have come under critique in recent years as we will see below.

The first and most fundamental feature of the traditional view of wisdom is that there is a distinct genre of wisdom texts whose core is formed by three books considered canonical by all Christian traditions, namely, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. Two other books, Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon, are of disputed canonical status but are also uniformly considered to be part of the wisdom literature corpus.\(^5\) Our discussion will mainly focus on the three core and widely accepted canonical books.

To say that Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes are wisdom literature is, at least in the first place, to make a genre identification. Genres are literary categories and individual texts are thought to be members of a genre based on similarities in content, form, style, purpose or intention. The traditional school of thought works within the parameters of genre theory associated with form criticism as developed at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The work of Hermann Gunkel, commonly considered the founder of form criticism, is foundational to an understanding and application of genre (German \textit{Gattung}) in the field throughout much of the twentieth century. Gunkel himself commendably reached outside his field to develop his understanding of genre by learning from the theory of folklorist scholars, particularly the Grimm brothers.\(^6\)

Gunkel believed that genres had pure forms and those texts that had features from other genres he referred to as \textit{Mischwesen} with the presumption that somehow those texts originally were more consistent


with their genre and at a later point were merged with another text or adapted with accretions that were detectable against the background of the supposed pure form. Gunkel and his followers believed that texts grew over time from their oral origins to their present literary form, so that in a study of a text one can go from the form in which we have it in the canon and then trace it back to its original form. In other words, Gunkel had a diachronic understanding of genre and a Romantic sense that the original was better or more authentic than the later form.

Another feature of Gunkel’s understanding of genre that is influential upon the traditional understanding of wisdom has to do with a text’s social location, what he called its Sitz im Leben. Genres have one and only one social location, so he argued. We can see, for instance, a vibrant debate among Gunkel’s followers over the Sitz im Leben of the Psalms. Mowinckel posited that psalms emerged in the context of, and were used in, an annual New Year’s festival, while Weiser suggested an annual covenant festival and Kraus an annual Zion festival. In the following discussion, we will see that traditional interpreters will argue that wisdom literature has a Sitz im Leben that differs from other biblical literature with a concomitant belief that the genre emerges from a distinct worldview.

Gunkel, in essence, adopted a neoclassical genre theory, which G. N. G. Orsini describes as ‘a nineteenth-century phenomenon that held a rigid view of genres as pure and hierarchical’.7 His approach to genre may be described as taxonomic in that each text ought to be assigned to a specific genre that could be associated with a particular social location.

Such an approach to genre can easily become prescriptive rather than descriptive. The latter simply observes similarities between texts of different types [content, themes, structure, vocabulary, etc.], while the former has a list of essential characteristics that a text must display in order to be a member of a genre. This view of genre is rigid too because it asserts that there is only one right genre for each text, a mistaken view that we will address below with examples.

We now turn our attention to the traditional school’s assertion that there is a genre of wisdom literature; we are initially struck by how wisdom’s distinctiveness seems defined by contrast or absence of features found in other parts of Scripture. In the first place, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes do not feature the great historical-redemptive moments of biblical history. There are no references to the patriarchs or the exodus, or to the conquest, continuing down through the history of Israel. In connection with this, these

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scholars will also argue that there is no real connection to the covenant, featured throughout the redemptive history or to the law.

A second feature that these scholars cite as distinguishing wisdom literature from the rest of the canon is a lack of appeal to revelation. Whereas the law was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19–24), and the prophets both cite their divine commissioning (Isaiah 6; Jer 1:6–10; Ezekiel 1–3) and frequently remind their hearers/readers that their message comes directly from God (‘thus says the Lord’, ‘decree of the Lord’), the sages who produced the wisdom books relied on human experience and observation (Prov 6:6–8; 7:6–13), tradition handed down from previous generations (Prov 4:1–4a) and learning from their mistakes (Prov 10:17; 12:1). In the words of Douglas Miller who is characterising and critiquing this traditional view, the sages represent ‘an epistemology rooted in human experience’.

Not only, according to this traditional view, is wisdom literature distinct from the redemptive-historical, covenantal, legal and prophetic traditions, it is also distinct from the priestly realm. There is, in other words, no sustained interest in sacrifice, prayer, the temple, worship, issues of ritual purity and the like.

Indeed, this view often comes with the claim that wisdom literature downplays or even forfeits a distinctive Israelite understanding of God himself, leading some to the verge of characterising Israelite wisdom as secular or at least as holding a rather commonly held view of God. As Otto Eissfeldt put it, ‘The basis for the commendation of wisdom and piety is purely secular and rational’. Claus Westermann similarly stated: ‘The proverbs as such have a universal character. Proverbs can surface anywhere among humankind … [Proverbs mentioning God] have no specifically theological foundation in an explicitly theological context. Rather, they speak of God in such a manner as would any person without stepping outside of everyday secular discourse.’

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8 For more references and discussion, see Tremper Longman III, The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom: A Theological Introduction to Wisdom in Israel (Grand Rapids, 2017), 111–119.
11 Claus Westermann, Roots of Wisdom (Edinburgh, 1995), 130. See also Walter Brueggemann, In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith (Atlanta, 1972), 81–83. The idea that wisdom is fundamentally secular has been effectively critiqued by Lennart Boström, God of the Sages: The Portrayal of God in the Book of Proverbs (ConBOT 29, Stockholm, 1990), 36–39; and Zoltán S. Schwáb, Toward an
This viewpoint is often supported by the common and widely accepted observation that the type of wisdom found in Proverbs, say, is similar to and often thought to be influenced by broader ancient Near Eastern wisdom. This discussion goes back to at least 1924, when similarities were discovered between the Instruction of Amenemope and Proverbs, particularly in ‘the words of the wise’ found in Prov 22:17–24:22. Indeed, the fact that Solomon’s wisdom was considered ‘greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt’ (1 Kgs 4:30) shows that non-Israelite wisdom had significant value.

All of these observations lead to the conclusion that the wisdom literature of the Bible is not only distinct from other traditions within the Bible but also a kind of foreign or alien presence (Fremdkörper) in that it is cosmopolitan, universal, ecumenical, secular and non-particular. In short, in the words of William Brown: ‘Ancient Israel’s sages had no qualms incorporating the wisdom of other cultures. Biblical wisdom seeks the common good along with the common God. Wisdom’s international, indeed universal appeal constitutes its canonical uniqueness. The Bible’s wisdom corpus is the open door to an otherwise closed canon.’ But, in this traditional school of thought, wisdom literature was not only defined by what it isn’t but also by what it is. What it is, though, also contrasts with other traditions in the OT/ HB. As opposed to other traditions that were situated in one way or another in redemptive history, Wisdom was thought to be embedded in the theology of creation. As Zimmerli famously stated: ‘Wisdom thinks resolutely within the framework of a theology of creation’. God created the world with wisdom (Prov 3:19–20), meaning in an ordered way. We might see this expressed in Qohelet’s assertion that God ‘has made everything suitable for its time’ (Eccl 3:11), leading to his reflection that there is ‘a time for everything, and a season for every activity

Interpretation of the Book of Proverbs: Selfishness and Secularity Reconsidered, JTISup 7 [Winona Lake, 2013].

12 This observation goes back at least to Adolf Erman, ‘Eines agyptische Quelle der “Spruche Salomos”’, in SPAW 1924, 86–93.


under heaven’ (Eccl 3:1). The purpose of wisdom is to put one in touch with God’s creation in order to live in a way that maximises a successful life. Thus, the sages study the creation to see how it works, a way of knowing that would be accessible to all, including foreign sages.

We earlier commented on the characterisation of wisdom by the traditional view as secular, in terms of its lack of appeal to revelation or as having a specific theological foundation. The traditional view of wisdom also differentiates wisdom from other biblical traditions by being secular in its focus of interest. Von Rad commented that ‘since the objects of this search for knowledge were of a secular kind, questions about man’s daily life, systematic reflection on them was held to be a secular occupation’.15 The early Walter Brueggemann similarly opines: ‘I believe it is much more plausible to suggest that in the wisdom tradition of Israel we have a visible expression of secularization as it has been characterized in the current discussions. Wisdom teaching is profoundly secular in that it presents life and history as a human enterprise.’16 Reading through Proverbs in particular can give the impression indeed that what the sages were interested in were practical matters like wise speech, human relationships, planning, interacting with authorities and more.

This secular, or at least diminished, theological understanding of wisdom in the traditional school was also furthered by K. Koch’s study of retribution in wisdom, which he characterised as an act-consequence connection (Tun-Ergehen-Zusammenhang).17 He argued that, in wisdom, bad deeds led to their own negative consequences, while good deeds led to positive results without God’s intervention.

The Extent of Wisdom Literature
The traditional view thus asserts that Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes form the core of wisdom literature in the OT/HB and that they present a distinct genre over against the other genres of biblical literature. However, with these three books as a base, the category of wisdom grew over time to include other biblical books or portions thereof. Of course there is something of a paradox in scholarly thinking here. On the one hand, wisdom literature is distinct from other genres of the

16 Brueggemann, In Man We Trust, 81–82.
17 In his influential Klaus Koch, Um das Prinzip der Vergeltung in Religion und Recht des alten Testaments (Darmstad, 1972).
Bible; on the other hand, scholars detected wisdom throughout the rest of the OT/HB.

We should again note that, among scholars representing this traditional view, there is no unanimity about what should be included, and arguments were made over time for the inclusion of a number of other texts from other portions of the canon. We here highlight just a few of the most well-known examples.

Among books containing historical narrative, the Joseph narrative (Genesis 37–50) and Daniel (chs. 1–6) have been identified as wisdom. Both men are presented in their respective narratives as exhibiting the characteristics of wisdom as expressed particularly in the book of Proverbs. Von Rad made the case for Joseph by pointing to examples such as Joseph’s rejection of the sexual advances of Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39) in keeping with the warnings of the father to his son in Proverbs 5–7. The story itself explicitly identifies Joseph as a wise person, who is able to navigate the predicaments in which he finds himself and also can guide Pharaoh in his preparations for a severe famine (Gen 41:39–40). Since Daniel has many similarities as a character with Joseph, we are not surprised that Daniel is sometimes thought to be a sage and that the stories in the first part of the book are thought to be wisdom. After all, both are Hebrews who find themselves in a pagan court and both exhibit the behaviour and attitudes of proverbial wisdom. In the case of Daniel, he shows wisdom as he interacts with the king and the court in keeping with Prov 16:14; 22:11 and 25:15. In Daniel 1, as Daniel seeks to avoid eating the food and drink provided by King Nebuchadnezzar, he exhibits patience and calm as advised in Prov 14:17; 14:29; 16:32 and 17:27. And again, the biblical text explicitly describes him as a person with wisdom (see Dan 2:14).

We might also cite other studies that have sought to expand the wisdom label to a number of other historical texts. These include


Genesis 3, the Succession Narrative\textsuperscript{20} and Esther.\textsuperscript{21} These connections are drawn on the basis of a similar vocabulary as that found in Proverbs, similar concepts or, as with the Joseph and Daniel narratives, the depiction of behaviours and attitudes that conform to the values of Proverbs.

In terms of law, a passage like that found in Deuteronomy asserts that the law is a public expression of wisdom:

\begin{quote}
just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who when they hear all these statutes will say. ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!’ [4:5–6]\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Going back to at least Gunkel and Begrich,\textsuperscript{23} many specialists in the book of Psalms have categorised some psalms as wisdom. Indeed, while there are disagreements as to the exact number and identity of wisdom psalms in the collection, Psalms 1, 19 (second half), 37, 49, 73, 112 and 119 provide a consistent core. These psalms share language and themes with Proverbs, Job or Ecclesiastes. For instance, the composer of Psalm 73 struggles with the issue of the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked in a spirit similar to Job. Psalm 1 uses the language and the concepts (the way of the righteous and the wicked) that we find in Proverbs. Since Psalm 1 is the opening psalm of the book, and surely occupies that introductory place by intention, some scholars, such as Jacobsen, believe that it turns the book as a whole into a book of instruction. As she puts it, ‘the Psalter is also a book of instruction. Psalms are not only prayed and sung, they are also to be read and studied’\textsuperscript{24}.

Other scholars identify the Song of Songs as wisdom literature.\(^{25}\) The primary connection here has to do with wisdom’s practical and ethical nature.\(^{26}\) The Song’s focus on intimate sexual relationships is sometimes related to the teaching of the father in Proverbs that the son find satisfaction in his relationship with ‘the wife of your youth’ and specifically the teaching found in Prov 5:15–23.

From these examples, we can see how the category of wisdom spread through the rest of the canon. As we will see, recent scholarship argues that there is a fundamental conflict in thinking that wisdom is distinct from the rest of the canon while suggesting that wisdom permeates the different parts of the canon.

**The Social Location and Worldview of Wisdom Literature**

What we are calling the traditional view often goes beyond putting forward a clear core of books that constitute wisdom literature by expanding the category to many other portions of the OT/HB. Even further, it often posits that these books were produced by a distinct group within Israelite society: the sages, who lived in a world distinct and sometimes in contrast to the world inhabited by the prophets and priests. To those holding such a perspective, Jer 18:18 might operate as a kind of proof text: ‘Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah – for instruction will not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet’.

In the form critical tradition originating in the thought of Gunkel, genres were thought to have a single and distinct sociological setting (Sitz im Leben; see more below). In the case of wisdom literature, that setting was thought to be in the social world of the sage. Often accompanying this perspective was the belief that schools of some sort existed for training sages for their profession and had a distinct worldview that,

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\(^{26}\) Though Childs (*Introduction to the Old Testament*) also points to the superscription that associates the book with Solomon [1:1], the paradigmatic sage. In the early modern period, one strand of allegorical reading of the Song, represented by Don Isaac Abravanel in the sixteenth century, takes the woman in the Song as Wisdom, comparable to Woman Wisdom in Proverbs.
as we have already discussed, was rooted in creation theology and was more universal, cosmopolitan, ecumenical and practical than the worldview of other sectors of society that produced biblical literature.

THE CONTEMPORARY REACTION AGAINST THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

The Genre of Wisdom

In the past decade or so, some scholars have mounted a significant challenge to the traditional view of the scope and nature of wisdom literature described above. In the first place, they question whether there is a distinct genre of wisdom literature at all, which, of course, leads to a question concerning the existence of a distinct wisdom tradition, worldview or social group. Among those advocating this challenge, we take particular note of the work of Mark Sneed and Will Kynes. These two and others that follow their line of argument do not agree on all the particulars but hold a general consensus that the traditional view misrepresents the nature of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes by insisting that they be read as a distinct genre produced by a distinct group within Israel who share a distinct worldview.27 Our focus will be on the work of Kynes, as the most recent and in some ways the most radical, though other scholars will be included in the discussion.

Kynes announces the death of wisdom28 as a literary category and makes the claim that the birth of wisdom literature was a scholarly construct of the mid-eighteenth century. He locates the origins of the category with Johann Friedrich Bruch who published Weisheits-Lehre der Hebräer in 1851. Kynes finds it significant that wisdom literature’s birth was a relatively modern invention that he believes appealed to modern scholars since they thought that this corner of the canon, when judged apart from the other biblical books, was resonant with their own more humanistic bent of thought.

He and other scholars question the utility of separating Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes from other books and then differentiating them

27 Mark R. Sneed (‘Grasping after the Wind: The Elusive Attempt to Define and Delimit Wisdom’, in Sneed, Was There a Wisdom Tradition?, 40) points out that the traditional view ‘assume[s] falsely that genre can encapsulate a worldview’, and he helpfully reminds us that ‘the reality is that all the Israelites held the same worldview’ (p. 41). In the same volume, Michael V. Fox (‘Three Theses on Wisdom’, 74) agrees that ‘there is no reason to suppose that the authors of Israelite wisdom belonged to a certain school and subscribed to a distinctive ideology’.

28 As is clearly announced by the title of his book, An Obituary for ‘Wisdom Literature’.
from other traditions within the Bible. In the first place, all three books resist the prescriptive and rigid conception of genre advanced by Gunkel and employed by the traditional school that leads to the view that wisdom literature is a distinct category in itself.

According to Kynes and other more recent researchers, genres are not pure forms that may be recognised by a list of required shared characteristics. On the contrary, genre categories are fluid and not distinct, having fuzzy boundaries, not distinct lines of demarcation. Texts within genres are never exactly alike, not even necessarily sharing what are considered by some to be essential characteristics. Sneed, for instance, uses the language of family resemblance when he talks about genre. Just as members of a family may bear similarities in their looks and mannerisms, so texts share similarities that draw readers’ attention and leads them to read the texts in the light of each other.

Kynes employs a different analogy, though his views share a similar perspective to Sneed. He argues that genre connections are similar to constellations. Constellations are formed by stars that have a perceived pattern that cause the observer to look at them as a set, even though the stars involved may have differences that would cause them to be grouped with another set of stars if judged by other characteristics (say by size). Constellations form groups of stars and genres create groups of texts.

Constellations are dynamic in relationship to space and time. The stars move and die over time and thus obscure or eradicate the pattern. They also may be perceived differently from different locations. The perception of genres is also dynamic, according to Kynes, particularly as viewed over time or from different cultural perspectives. For this reason, researchers must recognise the potential distortion in understanding caused by imposing modern categories on ancient literature. Such a perspective on genre also highlights the need to recognise that a text participates in multiple genres. We will see that this is one of Kynes’

fundamental insights and shows that his genre theory differs radically from that inspired by Gunkel, where texts have one genre which themselves have one Sitz im Leben.

Kynes is quick to point out that this view of genre does not lead to relativism. After all, he says that ‘any genre grouping is constrained by the actual features of the text’. In other words, to suggest that a text participates in a genre of other texts with which it shares no features is wrong. To include texts in a genre requires that the interpreter point to actual similarities between the texts. But again, and this is key to Kynes and others like him, it is a mistake that leads to a distorted understanding of a text to suggest that any text belongs to one and only one genre. As he succinctly puts it, ‘arguing that Pilgrim’s Progress is not an allegory is a misinterpretation, but so is arguing that an allegory is all that it is’.

Kynes’ genre theory emerges from his recognition of the vast intertextual relationship between texts. He understands that texts are not able to be understood in strict isolation but need to be read in relationship to each other. He sees genre as an ‘intertextual shorthand’ that highlights certain significant similarities between texts that lead to a richer reading of the text as long as genres, which he calls ‘irrigation ditches’, don’t become a dam (by suggesting that there is only one genre).

When it comes to wisdom, we need to recognise that, say, the book of Job, may also participate, as Katharine Dell argues, in the category of lament. Kynes goes further, saying that ‘as a particularly bright star in the canonical universe, it shines in numerous constellations’. He then goes on to speak about Job’s participation ‘before “Wisdom Literature”’, presumably meaning a broader genre category (sharing fewer traits but with more participants) with the Sifrei Emet, poetry, history, Torah, prophecy, drama and epic. Then he goes to speak of Job’s relationship to other texts in its ancient Near Eastern context, such as exemplary-sufferer

32 Kynes, An Obituary for ‘Wisdom Literature’, 140. ‘Rejecting the notion of a single correct genre for texts – a single pattern in which they should be read that has emerged from a solitary vantage point – and instead embracing the multidimensional subjectivity of interpretation might actually enable interpreters to produce a more objective interpretation by triangulating the text’s meaning among a broader array of subjective vantage points.’
33 Kynes, An Obituary for ‘Wisdom Literature’, 139.
34 Kynes, An Obituary for ‘Wisdom Literature’, 140.
Texts, controversy dialogue and didactic narrative. He then concludes by exploring what he calls ‘adapted genres’, genres of the whole and of parts that he suggests have been ‘consistently remolded and repurposed’, including lament, lawsuit, metaprophecy and apocalyptic. Finally, he considers ‘meta-genres’, which are proposals that ‘associate the book with other texts that use this same technique’ so ‘they could also be considered proposals for its genre’. Here he includes parody, citation and polyphony.

Importantly, Kynes does not deny that ‘wisdom is certainly an important concept in the debate between Job and his friends, and the book as a whole engages many of the issue central to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes’. We will come back to this point later, since it seems to allow for ongoing discussion of a genre of wisdom literature; but for now, Kynes makes the very significant point, over against traditional interpreters, that it is distorting to the discernment of the meaning of the book of Job to restrict our perspective to one and only one genre. He makes the same case with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

The Extent of Wisdom
In our description of the traditional approach to wisdom literature, we detected a tendency to significantly expand the category beyond the core of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. Various stories in the historical accounts, law, some psalms, Song of Songs and some prophets have been brought into the purview of wisdom.

Kynes complains that if all texts are wisdom, then none are wisdom. He likens this category expansion to the expansion that occurred with the idea of Deuteronomic theology. The first move was to speak of a Deuteronomic or Deuteronomistic history that extends from Joshua through 2 Kings. Then various prophets, most notably perhaps Jeremiah, were read as reflecting Deuteronomic theology. As the category expands, it weakens its distinctive nature. When it comes to wisdom, it diminishes the argument that wisdom is a Fremdkörper as well. But the real problem Kynes has with this expansive move is that it sucks everything into the wisdom category. He complains about ‘the progression from scholarly consensus to vague definition to

chain-reaction extension and consequent dilution of the genre’s interpretive significance’. For Kynes, the expansion of the wisdom category in other parts of the OT/HB shows the vagueness of the definition of wisdom and thus he advocates abandoning the practice of bringing nearly everything under the rubric of wisdom.

**The Social Location and Worldview of Wisdom**

As we observed above, the traditional view argued that wisdom was produced by a distinct group in Israel, the sages, who did not think like prophets or priests. They had their own worldview that differentiated them from these others. They eschewed revelation in favour of personal experience and observation. They did not think in terms of the history of redemption but rather did their reflection in the light of a theology of creation. They focused on everyday life rather on God’s acts in history. In short, according to the traditional view, wisdom was the purview of the sage whose worldview could be characterised as universal (or international, in that it shared ideas with the broader ancient Near East), secular and humanistic. In short, wisdom was an alien or foreign presence in the OT/HB.

According to Kynes, Sneed and others, however, this is a distorted picture of wisdom in the OT/HB, a stereotype that reflected the ecumenical thinking of the scholars who painted this picture of wisdom. On the contrary, they insist, wisdom was not the result of the thinking of a distinct group with its separate worldview and institutions in Israel. Wisdom – far from being universal, secular and humanistic – was particular and deeply theological. Weeks, for instance, points out that ‘at the level of ideas, it is difficult to find anything in the wisdom literature as a whole which is not found elsewhere as well’. Sneed argues effectively that the advocates of the traditional view ‘assume falsely that genre can encapsulate a worldview’, and he helpfully reminds us that ‘the reality is that all the Israelites held the same worldview’. Fox, though in some ways a more traditional thinker, agrees that ‘there is no reason to suppose that the authors of Israelite wisdom belonged to a certain school and subscribed to a distinctive ideology’.

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44 Sneed, ‘Grasping after the Wind’, 40.

45 Sneed, ‘Grasping after the Wind’, 41.

46 Fox, ‘Three Theses on Wisdom’, 74.
THE WAY FORWARD

The Genre of Wisdom

As we noted above, a tremendous difference exists between the traditional view and its contemporary challenge in the area of genre theory. The former operates with an early nineteenth-century rigid, prescriptive, taxonomic understanding that is sometimes called a realistic approach to genre. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, biblical scholars began to shift their view to what is commonly called a nominalistic approach.

While the former thought in terms of a text having one genre which itself had one sociological setting, the latter rightly thinks that a text can participate in more than one genre and may have more than one setting, which itself does not have to be sociological but literary or historical. While Kynes pronounces the death of the wisdom category based on more sophisticated nominalist genre theory, in reality it provides the grounds for continuing to call Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes ‘wisdom literature’.

The following argument may be put forward to support the idea that Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes do indeed participate in a genre that we might call wisdom. To paraphrase Kynes’ statement above about Pilgrim’s Progress, I believe it is correct to say that arguing that Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes are not wisdom literature is a misinterpretation but so is arguing that wisdom literature is all that it is.

What I provide here is simply what might be called the lead argument for such a claim, not a full marshalling of all the similarities. Even so, we are of the opinion that these observations are sufficient to establish that, though not its exclusive genre, these three books may be called ‘wisdom literature’. Indeed, we would say that the following observations are why scholars in the modern period have studied these books together. The observation is that all three of these books are in one way or another about wisdom. If it is not a mature theme, it is certainly a significant one.

Proverbs, for instance, announces that wisdom is its main subject in the preamble (1:1–7), where it announces that its purpose is to teach wisdom to both those who are ‘simple’ and ‘young’, on the one hand, as


48 See below on etic [non-native] and emic [native] approaches to genre.
well as the ‘wise’ and ‘discerning’, on the other hand (1:4–5). In the opening three verses of the preamble, we read:

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
For gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity.

(1:1–3)

While lots of questions surround the interpretation of Proverbs, the rest of the book certainly lives up to the billing anticipated in this preamble.

The book of Ecclesiastes also relates to wisdom in that the two speakers, Qohelet (1:12–12:7) and the frame narrator (1:1–11; 12:8–14), both style themselves men of wisdom. Qohelet begins his autobiographical reflections by announcing his project to ‘seek and search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven’ (1:13). He also claims ‘I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge’ (1:16). Even the frame narrator, who I believe is critical of Qohelet’s conclusion that life is meaningless under the sun, tells his son that Qohelet is ‘wise’ (12:9). While the frame narrator never self-identifies as wise, he seems to represent himself as such as he guides his son away from an ‘under-the-sun’ perspective to an ‘above-the-sun’ one (see below on fear of God).

Kynes and Dell are certainly correct that Job should be studied in association with books other than Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Nonetheless, we should continue to note Job’s connection to wisdom. When we do, we can see that Job is a type of debate, and more precisely, a debate about wisdom. ‘Who is wise?’ and ‘where is wisdom to be found?’ are two important questions addressed by Job. The book of Job is a ‘thought experiment’ where Job’s suffering leads to a heated interaction between Job and his three friends (Job 1–27). Wisdom can provide a prescription for a problem and offer a remedy, and both Job and his three friends assert their wisdom to address Job’s situation. The three friends say Job’s suffering is a result of his sin; therefore, the solution to his problem is repentance (see, for instance, Zophar’s argument in Job 11). Job resists their interpretation because he knows he has

49 John H. Walton and Tremper Longman III, How to Read Job (Downers Grove, 2015), 35.
not sinned. His view is that his suffering is the result of divine injustice and that the only remedy is to meet God and demand justice. Elihu comes in after the disputation between Job and his three friends, claiming a spiritual source for his wisdom (32:8–9), but then ultimately he ends up parroting the three friends’ argument that Job is a sinner and needs to repent (34:5–37). Job 28 anticipates the conclusion of the book of Job. At the end, Job gets his wish to meet with God, but it does not go the way he expected it would. Rather than advancing his claim against God, God simply asserts his power and wisdom. Ultimately, Job submits to God and decides to live in God’s presence without an explanation for his suffering. If Job is rightly understood to be a debate over who is wise and where wisdom can be found, the answer is none other than Yahweh.

These readings of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes need to be defended in more detail. Nevertheless, if we are on the right track, then we should agree that indeed there is a generic connection between these three books. We will simply highlight another feature that connects them. All three books intend to move their readers to fear God.

Proverbs, of course, communicates this intention by its so-called motto which concludes the preface with ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge’ (1:7), an observation that echoes throughout the book (1:29; 2:5; 3:7; 8:13; 10:27; 14:2, 26, 27). The book of Ecclesiastes concludes when the second wise man exhorts his son (see 12:10) to ‘fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone’ (12:13). The book of Job begins with Job already fearing God (1:1), and, when he chooses to suffer in silence at the end of the book, his fear is more mature since it is based on a more intimate knowledge: ‘I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you’ (42:5). Indeed, in Job 28, often seen as an anticipation of the ultimate conclusion of the book, we read that ‘the fear of the Lord, the I wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding’ (Job 28:28).

But what about Kynes’ concern that the category of ‘wisdom literature’ is a mid-nineteenth century construct? Yes, there is a danger that a modern category might prevent us from reading these books in the way the original audience did but not necessarily so. Kynes himself is aware that simply to rule ‘out a category because it is modern not ancient is

50 As I do in Proverbs, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids, 2006); Job, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids, 2012); and Ecclesiastes, NICOT (Grand Rapids, 1998) as well as The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom.

not a sufficient argument’. He realises that ‘the implications of the origin of Wisdom Literature must be interpreted with care, since any conclusions drawn from it run the risk of the genetic fallacy that an idea’s origins can be used either to confirm or contradict its truth’.

In my own study over the years, I have found the distinction between emic and etic approaches to language and literature to prove helpful. The emic approach describes native designations and classification of literature. This approach has the advantage of giving the researcher insight into the native consciousness of a particular text and also into the relationship between that text and others bearing the same designation. The etic view of literature imposes a non-native grid or classification scheme, not necessarily defined in their language, and is the result of modern scholarly observation of similarities among texts. To be honest, since we do not have a poetics of ancient Hebrew literature, we can’t be sure whether or not the ancients shared our views on the subject, but then again not even authors are necessarily fully conscious of the genre in which they write.

The Extent of Wisdom
As for the expansion of the wisdom category put forward by the traditional approach and challenged by Kynes, we might suggest that both are overreactions. If one argues, for example, that the Joseph Narrative as a whole is wisdom literature, then that is simply an overreaching conclusion. Still, one can’t deny that there are wisdom elements in the text, especially in Joseph’s characterisation as a wisdom figure. On the other hand, Kynes goes too far when he says ‘if Wisdom can mean anything and everything, then it means nothing’. We might push back and say, no one, or at least very few people, argues that everything is

54 Kenneth Pike, Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of Human Behavior (The Hague, 1967), ch. 2, and Vern S. Poythress, ‘Analysing a Biblical Text: Some Important Linguistic Distinctions’, SJT 32 (1979): 113–137. The emic/etic distinction was first proposed in linguistics, where it was used to distinguish native understanding of language from the analysis of a language by linguists or other outsiders. Pike was the first to generalise the distinction into a principle that could be used in the study of any aspect of culture. Poythress further refined the concept. For the tendency of taking linguistic categories and applying them to other disciplines, see Jonathan Culler, The Pursuit of Signs (Ithaca, 1981), 27–39.
wisdom. Even those, for instance, who would argue that the introductory Psalm 1 puts one in a wisdom mindset at the beginning of the psalter would still recognise only a relatively small, discrete number of psalms as wisdom psalms. The others are hymns, laments, thanksgiving, kingship, confidence or some other type of psalm.

But it is precisely in the idea that texts can participate in more than one genre that we have a literary justification for continuing to speak of and study wisdom literature, to posit Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes as a core and to suggest that other texts in the OT/HB might also participate in the genre. Kynes himself rightly defines genre ‘simply as groups of texts gathered together due to some perceived significant affinity between them’.57 Our contention is that Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes have a ‘significant affinity’ with each other that justifies the modern perception of them as participating in a genre that has been labelled ‘wisdom’. Furthermore, other texts that share these similarities, at least in part, may also be fruitfully studied in relationship to them.

The Social Location and Worldview of Wisdom Literature
This approach to wisdom literature, however, does not subvert what might be seen as Kynes’ central project – to demolish the idea that wisdom literature is a Fremdkörper, an alien part of the canon definitively distinct from the other traditions as if it does not share a fundamental allegiance to Israel’s core commitment to Yahweh. Upon close reading, it appears that Kynes is being provocative and hyperbolic when he speaks of the ‘obituary’ of wisdom literature. For the category is not dead even in his own thinking. He himself says that ‘the Wisdom Literature category, then, is only one of the ways that texts may be grouped together within the OT/HB. It recognizes certain salient affinities between its three core texts’.58 What Kynes rightly worries about is not that there is a case to be made for wisdom as a generic category but that a sole focus on these books as wisdom leads to a distorted understanding of them and obscures actual relationship with other books within the canon. Wisdom literature, he rightly insists, does not have a completely different worldview than the rest of the OT/HB.

57 Kynes, An Obituary for ‘Wisdom Literature’, 247. Sneed (‘Grasping after the Wind’, 62) also acknowledges that ‘all the books scholars usually designate as wisdom literature share a family resemblance’, though also rightly noting differences between them.
CONCLUSION

Kynes, Sneed and others have done the study of wisdom a great service by moving the field away from the traditional view held by some. Not only do some scholars hold the view that these texts were radically different from the rest of the canon, but some also took a diachronic view of the books to argue that any part that shared an affirmation of Yahweh as opposed to a general view of god that could be shared with others was a later addition.

Kynes and others have succeeded in bringing Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes back into the canonical fold. They have rightly urged the study of wisdom in its final form and also in relationship to other texts which form different genres with which they also share characteristics. We just need to be cautious against the tendency to overreact by thinking that the category of wisdom literature is actually dead.

Further Reading


