

Canadian Mennonite University
Wisdom Literature
Choosing the Way of Life in an Age of Freedom:
A Journey into Hebrew Wisdom
DRAFT
(3 credit hours)

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I. COURSE DESCRIPTION

Many observers claim that we are entering into what is called the “postmodern age,” a period characterized by the rejection of moral absolutes and the absence of consensus, particularly as it relates to morality, religion, and the meaning of life. Although such a shift may seem disconcerting to Christians and may even lead some to ask whether the biblical text can still be relevant to such people, we will seek to demonstrate that Hebrew wisdom literature can indeed make a critical contribution to our understanding of the Judeo-Christian faith and its relevance to our contemporaries. The Wisdom books were designed to address an audience that enjoyed a multiplicity of options, was in reaction against faith in God, and would not accept to be coerced by authority.

How does one effectively communicate to such an audience? How does one persuade reluctant, cynical, and often narcissistic listeners to seriously consider the Way of life and turn away from chaos and oblivion? That is the challenge of the Wisdom writers. But it is not their challenge only; it has in fact been the challenge of the Church throughout the ages.

The Wisdom writers are masters of persuasion. While they know where they stand, they do not dictate a point of view or bully their listeners into submission. They use rather a rich arsenal of arguments to convince their audience to seriously ponder what gives significance to human life and to recognize the only source of true life. In an age of cynicism and nihilism such as ours, it is again imperative we rediscover the secrets of the old Hebrew Wisdom writers.

In this course, we will consider Wisdom literature in general, first as it is attested in Ancient Near Eastern literature, then in the Old Testament. We will examine specifically the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. The deuterocanonical wisdom books will be surveyed as time allows.

II. COURSE OBJECTIVES

- A. The student will become acquainted with the Wisdom tradition in Israel in relationship to the Ancient Near Eastern *milieu*.
- B. The student will become familiar with the literary characteristics of Wisdom literature.
- C. The student will become familiar with the contents, theological significance, and possible relevance of the following Wisdom books: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon.
- D. Students will explore how to preach and teach relevantly from the biblical wisdom books.

III. TEXTS FOR THE COURSE

- Garrett, Duane A. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. The New American Commentary. Vol. 14. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1993. (448 p.).
- Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL:IVP, 1985).

SUGGESTED TEXTBOOKS

- Davis, Ellen F. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000 (304 p).
- Von Rad, G. *Wisdom in Israel*. Abingdon, 1972.
- O'Connor, Kathleen. *The Wisdom Literature*. Message of Biblical Spirituality. Vol.5. Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988.
- Melchert, Charles F. *Wise Teaching. Biblical Wisdom and Educational Ministry*. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1998.
- Murphy, Roland, E. *The Tree of Life*. 3e ed. Eerdmans, 2002 [1996, 1990]. (296 p.)

IV. COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

A. Readings

1. Textbooks and Supplemental Readings

Students are required to read the textbooks by Garrett and Kidner (approx. 625 pages) plus an additional 300 pages on relevant material. Students are asked to write a 4-5 page book report on Garrett and Murphy respectively and to provide a report of the supplemental readings (include only bibliographical information and specific pages read).

2. Biblical Wisdom Books

Students are required to read each one of the wisdom books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon) at least once. Students are expected to provide a short (ca.150 words) report on each book that summarizes the main argument of the book.

B. Written Assignment

Students are required to write a 15-20 page paper (ca 4500 words). Students have a choice between the following options.

1. Wisdom Theme

Students can select to write their paper on a theme found in the book of Proverbs (see list below) in interaction with another wisdom book or any other book of the Old Testament. For example, if the student chooses the theme of prosperity, the paper should reflect not only the perspective offered in the book of Proverbs, but also its treatment in another book of the Old Testament (ex. prophetic literature, Deuteronomistic tradition, etc.). As another example, the student could also examine the concept of wisdom in Proverbs and compare it with the depiction of wisdom in Solomon's life. In addition to a solid academic dimension, the paper should reflect a strong theological/pastoral/reflection component. The student must get the approval of the instructor for the topic.

Options:

Wisdom: What is it and What is it Good for?

Pedagogical Strategies: How Do You Get Them to Listen?

Wisdom and Folly: How Can I Keep from Making a Fool of Myself?

The Righteous and the Wicked (or Lifestyles of the Righteous and the Wicked)

The Words We Say!

The Family (or Family Relationships and Responsibilities)
 Laziness and Hard Work
 Wealth and Poverty
 Friends and Neighbors (or Social Relationships and Responsibilities)
 Plans and Decisions
 The Proud and the Humble
 Anger and Self-Control
 The Fear of the Lord

Students have the option of choosing an alternate topic, but must receive approval from the professor.

For more details, see: *Eerdmans Handbook to the Bible*, pp. 358-359 or professor's hand out on the book of Proverbs.

2. Alternative Topics

Students also have the option of choosing among the choices listed below.

- a. The Theology/argument of
 - The book of Ecclesiastes
 - The book of Job
 - The Song of Solomon
- b. Exegetical study
- c. Annotated sermon or bible study.

C. Oral Presentation

Students will be invited to present the **preliminary** results of their research/reflection in the context of a short class presentation (10-12 minutes). Details will be provided in class.

V. COURSE OUTLINE

- A. Introduction
- B. Origins and Evolution of Wisdom
- C. Wisdom in the Ancient Near East
 1. Introduction
 2. Wisdom in Egypt
 3. Wisdom in Mesopotamia
 4. Wisdom in Syria
 5. Conclusions
- D. Wisdom Literature in Israel
 1. Job
 2. Proverbs
 3. Ecclesiastes
 4. Song of Solomon
 5. Deuterocanonical Books
 - a. Wisdom of Solomon
 - b. Ecclesiasticus
- E. Conclusion

VI. COURSE GRADING

A. Attendance and Participation:	10
B. Reading:	30
Kidner	(10)
Garrett	(10)

Supplemental	(5)	
Wisdom Books	(5)	
B. Research Paper:		55
C. Presentation:		5
Total:		100

COURSE BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bullock, C.H. *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books: The Wisdom and Songs of Israel*. Chicago: Moody, 1979. (SH BS 1405.2B84)
- Crenshaw, J. L. *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*. John Knox, 1981.
- _____, ed. *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*. KTAV. New York, 1976.
- Cross, F.M. *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*. Missoula, Mont.: scholars Press, 1975.
- Dubarle, A.-M. *Les sages d'Israël*. Paris, 1946.
- Fohrer, G. "Sophia." *TDNT*. Vol. 7. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971.
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- Gordis, R. *Poets, Prophets and Sages*. Indiana University Press, 1971.
- Kidner, D. "Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament." *New Perspective on the Old Testament*. Ed. by J.B. Payne. 1970. Pp. 117-130.
- Küchler, M. *Frühjüdische Weisheitstraditionen*. OBO. Vol. 26. Fribourg, 1979.
- Kugel, J.L. *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its History*. New Haven: Yale Univ., 1981.
- Murphy, Roland E. "Introduction to Wisdom Literature." In *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990. Pp. 447-452.
- _____. *Wisdom Literature*. FOTL. Vol. 13. 1981.
- Noth, M. and D. W. thomas, eds. *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*. Rowley Festschrift. VTS. Vol. 3. 1955.
- Preuss, H. D. *Einführung in die alttestamentliche Weisheitsliteratur*. Stuttgart, 1987.
- Pritchard, J.B., ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. 3rd. ed. New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969.
- Robertson, D.A. *Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry*. Missoula, Mont.: SBL, 1972.
- Schmid, H. H. *Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit*. BZAW. Vol. 101. Berlin, 1966.
- Stuart, D.K. *Studies in Early Hebrew Meter*. Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976.
- Von Rad, G. *Wisdom in Israel*. Abingdon, 1972.
- Watson, W.G.E. *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*. Sheffield: JSOT, 1984.
- Williams, J. G. *Those who Ponder Proverbs: Aphoristic Thinking and Biblical Literature*. Almond Press, 1981.