

Hermeneutics
Session 15
OT Wisdom

Hermeneutics Outline

1. Introduction: What is hermeneutics and why should we care?
2. What is the Bible and how did we get it?
3. Why so many translations? And which is best?
4. What is the history of Hermeneutics?
5. What are the different hermeneutical approaches, and which is best?
6. What are the key principles of good hermeneutics?
7. NT Genres: Epistles
8. NT Genres: Gospels
9. NT Genres: Parables
10. OT Genres: Hebrew Historical Narrative
11. NT Genres: Acts
12. OT Genres: Law
13. OT Genres: Prophets
14. OT Genres: Psalms
15. OT Genres: Wisdom
16. NT Genres: Revelation
17. What are the tools we have available to us today to study the Bible?
18. Practicing Hermeneutics: Big Idea Study

Summary:

Wisdom Literature

Wisdom literature is focused on the ability to make good life-choices. When reading Biblical wisdom literature, it is helpful to remember that submission and obedience to God is the only right backdrop for wisdom. It is poetry and uses poetic techniques, and needs to be interpreted appropriately. Context is important, keeping in mind the immediate context of a passage, the context of the book as a whole, and the context of Scripture as a whole. In addition, it is helpful to remember that wisdom literature is not intended to give theology; it is intended to give practical advice for wise living.

Proverbs

Proverbs are short and memorable sayings to provide wisdom for life-choices. They are not promises from God or meant to be taken over-literally; they are general truths. The historical distance requires us to 'translate' some of them into our contemporary culture. Considering the context is key: read a proverb in its immediate context, and in the context of the whole book of Proverbs, and in the context of the entirety of Scripture. Proverbs ought to be used to point us to be less selfish and materialistic and more focused on others and on God; if they are used otherwise they are used incorrectly.

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is a wisdom monologue reminding us of the difficult questions of life, and not giving us all the answers. Scholars differ on their interpretation of Ecclesiastes, but one thing they all agree on is that the purpose of Ecclesiastes being in the Bible is to cause us to ponder the meaninglessness of life without God, thereby submitting our lives to Him. Once again, a key to not mis-interpreting Ecclesiastes is to consider context (immediate context in the book of Ecclesiastes and the greater context of Bible as a whole).

Job

Job is 'speculative wisdom' and is structured with three parts: prologue, poetic dialogue, and epilogue. The prologue introduces the reader to the storyline of Job, giving us the outside perspective that Job and his 'comforters' do not have - namely the reality that God has the Big Picture and is sovereign and loving and that his ways are sometimes not understandable to us. Through the poetic dialogue the reader sees the tension between Job and his 'friends' as they try to understand the justice of God and the reality of suffering. The epilogue ends the book with God speaking, vindicating Job and yet also correcting him. When reading Job, the modern reader needs to recognize who is speaking, as the speaker is often speaking from a human wisdom which in the end turns out to be wrong! Again, context is key: remembering the context of the book of Job as a whole and the context of the Bible as a whole. The main message of Job is that God is sovereign over evil, and yet he allows it for reasons that we often do not understand.

Song of Songs

Song of Songs is a poetic love song about human romance. It is considered wisdom literature because it is associated with Solomon and because it deals with the wise-choices relating to submitting our sexuality to God and his vision for sexual love to be experienced only in a monogamous life-long marriage between a man and a woman. It is helpful when reading Song of Songs to consider the high, Godly view of romance expressed in Song of Songs as opposed to the selfish sexuality so prevalent in our culture today. Sex is a gift from God, and it is to be celebrated and enjoyed as such when submitted to Him and His Word.

Genres: OT Wisdom

How do we properly understand and apply OT Wisdom Literature?

Opening Questions:

1. What do you think of when you think of wisdom literature in the OT?
2. What books would you put in this category?
3. As we begin our discussion on wisdom literature: what do you think makes wisdom literature difficult for us to understand and apply?

Genres: OT Wisdom

How do we properly understand and apply OT Wisdom Literature?

Outline:

- **What is OT Wisdom Literature?**
- **Interpreting Proverbs**
- **Interpreting Job**
- **Interpreting Ecclesiastes**
- **Interpreting Song of Songs**
- **Summary Conclusion**

What is OT Wisdom?

The books:

- Proverbs
- Job
- Ecclesiastes
- Some psalms are wisdom psalms
- Song of Songs (Song of Solomon)

Defining Biblical Wisdom:

- Proverbs 9:10: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”
- Wisdom literature focuses on people and their behaviors.
- Isaiah 29:13-14
- 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Question: What would you say is a good, Biblical definition of wisdom?

What is OT Wisdom?

Definition from Fee and Stuart:

“Wisdom is the ability to make godly choices in life.”

What is OT Wisdom? - Poetry

Much of OT wisdom literature is poetry and uses poetic techniques:

1.Parallelisms

- 1.Synonymous (proverbs 7:4)
- 2.Antithetical (Proverbs 10:1)
- 3.Synthetic (Proverbs 21:16)

2.Acrostics (Proverbs 31:10-31)

3.Alliteration (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

4.Numerical sequences (Proverbs 30:15-31)

5.Many types of comparisons

- 1.Similes and metaphors (Job 32:19, Song 4:1-6)
- 2.Parables
- 3.Allegories
- 4.Riddles

Question: In light of wisdom literature being poetry and using poetic techniques, how should this impact the way we read, understand and apply wisdom literature?

What is OT Wisdom? - Limits

Wisdom literature is generally focused on day-to-day practical living, and tends not to focus on the theological.

Questions:

1. Would you say this is true (of Proverbs for example)? Explain.
2. How should this fact impact the way we read OT wisdom literature?

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Question:

What stands out to you most from this summary?

Interpreting Proverbs: What are Proverbs?

Defining proverbs:

Questions:

1. When you think of the book of Proverbs, what do you think of?
2. How would you define a proverb?

Interpreting Proverbs: What are Proverbs?

Definition of Proverbs from Fee and Stuart:

Proverbial wisdom- memorable maxims to help people make better life choices.

Questions:

1. In light of what proverbs are, what you say is the purpose of proverbs? What is NOT their purpose?
2. What might be some hermeneutical challenges?
3. How important do you think literary context is? (Immediate context/the book as a whole/the Bible as a whole.)
4. How about historical context? (culture, etc.)

Interpreting Proverbs: What are Proverbs?

In Proverbs we see a sharp contrast between a life of wisdom and a life of folly.

List from Fee and Stuart:

Wisdom

1. Caring for the poor (2:22, 27)
2. Respect for government leaders (23:1-3; 24:21-22)
3. Importance of disciplining children (23:13-14)
4. Moderation in use of alcoholic beverages (23:19-21, 29-35)
5. Regard for one's parents (23:22-25)

Folly

1. Violent crime (1:10-19, 4:14-19)
2. Careless promises (6:1-5)
3. Laziness (6:7-11)
4. Malicious dishonesty (6:12-15)
5. Sexual impurity (2:16-19; 5:3-20; 6:23-35; 7:4-27; 9:13-18; 23:26-28)

Interpreting Proverbs: What are Proverbs?

“The Hebrew word for proverb is [mesalim], having to do with “figures of speech,” “parables,” or “specially contrived sayings.” A proverb, therefore, is a brief, particular expression of a truth.” (How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, by Fee and Stuart)

Questions:

1. Would you expect proverbs, then, to be totally precise?
2. Would you expect them to be universally applicable? Explain.

Interpreting Proverbs: What are Proverbs?

They are catchy, short, memorable, and often have (in Hebrew) a rhythm and/or repetition of sorts.

“A proverb doesn’t say everything about a truth, but rather points toward it.”-Fee and Stuart

Examples in English:

“Look before you leap”

“A stitch in time says nine.”

Questions:

1. What would be longer ways of saying these English examples?
2. Would it be as effective? Why/why not?
3. Are they meant literally, only having to do with jumping or sewing?
4. How do these truths impact our hermeneutic for Proverbs?

Interpreting Proverbs: Examples

Proverbs 6:27-29

(the latter half of verse 29, taken out of context, could be misinterpreted)

Question: Consider 'touch' and 'unpunished'.

Proverbs 9:13-18

Proverbs 16:3

(this is often misinterpreted): What is this proverb saying? What is it NOT saying?

Proverbs: Hermeneutical guidelines from Fee and Stuart:

1. Proverbs are not legal guarantees from God.
 1. Proverbs 22:26-27
 2. Proverbs 29:12
 3. Proverbs 15:25
2. Proverbs must be read as a collection
 1. What does this mean? Why is this important?
 2. Example: Proverbs 21:22
 1. Like the modern proverb: “The pen is mightier than the sword”
 2. Context of the power of wisdom is important: 1:1-6, Chapters 2-3; 8; 22:17-29)
 3. Example: Proverbs 22:14
 1. Context of other proverbs stressing careful thought and speech:
1. 15:1, 16:10, 21, 23-24, 27-28; 18:4)
 4. Other examples: Proverbs 22:26 and Proverbs 6:20
3. Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not to be theoretically accurate.
 1. No proverb is a complete statement of truth
 2. Imagery: Proverbs 15:19
 3. Acrostic: 31:10-31
 1. Each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet
 2. “It is purposefully designed to emphasize by exaggeration the joy that a good wife brings to her family and community”
 3. “The words (and images) of the passage tend to stick with the reader.... That is what proverbs are intended by God to do.”
4. Some proverbs need to be “translated” to be appreciated.
 1. Historical and cultural distance
 1. Example: Proverbs 22:11
 2. Example: Proverbs 25:24

Proverbs: Summary of rules from Fee and Stuart:

1. Proverbs are often parabolic (figurative, pointing beyond themselves).
2. Proverbs are intensely practical, not theoretically theological.
3. Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not technically precise.
4. Proverbs are are not designed to support selfish behavior - just the opposite!
5. Proverbs strongly reflecting ancient cultures may need sensible “translation” so as not to lose their meaning.
6. Proverbs are not guarantees from God but poetic guidelines for good behavior.
7. Proverbs may use highly specific language, exaggeration, or any of a variety of literary techniques to make a point.
8. Proverbs give good advice for wise approaches to certain aspects of life but are not exhaustive in their coverage.
9. Wrongly used, proverbs may justify a crass, materialistic lifestyle. Rightly used, proverbs will provide practical advice for daily living.

Question:

1. Which of these is most helpful to you personally in reading Proverbs?

Summary:

Proverbs

Proverbs are short and memorable sayings to provide wisdom for life-choices. They are not promises from God or meant to be taken over-literally; they are general truths. The historical distance requires us to 'translate' some of them into our contemporary culture. Considering the context is key: read a proverb in its immediate context, and in the context of the whole book of Proverbs, and in the context of the entirety of Scripture. Proverbs ought to be used to point us to be less selfish and materialistic and more focused on others and on God; if they are used otherwise they are used incorrectly.

Question:

What stands out to you most from this summary?

Interpreting Job

Structure of Job:

- Prologue (Chapters 1-2):
- Poetic Dialogues (3:1-42:6)
- Epilogue (42:1-17)

“Job comes to us as a carefully structured dialogue between Job and his well-meaning but desperately wrong “comforters” - Bildad, Zophar, Eliphaz, and Elihu.

If you don't pay attention to who is speaking, you could very easily get wrong advice! What is the main point of the book of Job? “What happens in life does not always happen either because God desires it or because it is fair.”

Questions

1. What would you say is the basic story-line of Job?
2. What do we learn from the prologue about Job?
3. How does this effect the way we understand Job?
4. What is the purpose of the epilogue?
5. We (the readers) have the prologue and epilogue, but Job and his ‘comforters’ did not. How does this impact the way we read and understand Job?

Summary:

Job

Job is 'speculative wisdom' and is structured with three parts: prologue, poetic dialogue, and epilogue. The prologue introduces the reader to the storyline of Job, giving us the outside perspective that Job and his 'comforters' do not have - namely the reality that God has the Big Picture and is sovereign and loving and that his ways are sometimes not understandable to us. Through the poetic dialogue the reader sees the tension between Job and his 'friends' as they try to understand the justice of God and the reality of suffering. The epilogue ends the book with God speaking, vindicating Job and yet also correcting him. When reading Job, the modern reader needs to recognize who is speaking, as the speaker is often speaking from a human wisdom which in the end turns out to be wrong! Again, context is key: remembering the context of the book of Job as a whole and the context of the Bible as a whole. The main message of Job is that God is sovereign over evil, and yet he allows it for reasons that we often do not understand.

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Interpreting Ecclesiastes

Structure of Ecclesiastes

- Prologue (1:1-11)
- Wisdom monologue
- Epilogue (12:8-14)

Prologue and Epilogue are written “about” the teacher and gives us the frame by which to understand the wisdom monologue in-between.

Questions

1. What do you know about the book of Ecclesiastes?
2. Who wrote it?
3. When did he write it?
4. What do we know about the author (and his faith journey) at the time of writing? (1 Kings 11:1-13)

Interpreting Ecclesiastes

Two main approaches to Ecclesiastes:

- It is cynical wisdom, showing us an outlook on life that should be avoided.
- “It is an expression of how one should enjoy life under God in a world in which all die in the end.” (How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, by Fee and Stuart)

Speculative Wisdom: we should expect to be reminded of the hard questions of life; we should not expect answers.

Questions

1. Would you say is the purpose of Ecclesiastes?
2. Do you think Ecclesiastes often misunderstood? Explain.
3. From what we've learned about Ecclesiastes, what would you say are some important things to remember to make sure we understand and apply Ecclesiastes correctly?

Summary:

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is a wisdom monologue reminding us of the difficult questions of life, and not giving us all the answers. Scholars differ on their interpretation of Ecclesiastes, but one thing they all agree on is that the purpose of Ecclesiastes being in the Bible is to cause us to ponder the meaninglessness of life without God, thereby submitting our lives to Him. Once again, a key to not mis-interpreting Ecclesiastes is to consider context (immediate context in the book of Ecclesiastes and the greater context of Bible as a whole).

Question:

What stands out to you most from this summary?

Interpreting Song of Songs

“Song of Songs is a lengthy love song, a ballad about human romance, written in the style of ancient Near Eastern lyric poetry.

“It centers on human love - love between a man and a woman, celebrating both this love itself and their attraction to one another... celebrating human love in a monogamous relationship as God’s gift.”

Why is it considered wisdom literature?

- Associate with Solomon whose name was synonymous with ‘wisdom’ in ancient Israel.
- Deals with the wisdom of ‘wise choices’ of marital and sexual fidelity

Key Questions to Consider when reading Song of Songs:

1. What has been the impact of the Fall on sexual love?
2. What would you say sexual love ‘ought’ to be? What did God intend?

Interpreting Song of Songs

Hermeneutical Approach to Song of Songs:

1. Appreciate the overall ethical context: monogamous, heterosexual marriage as the proper context for sexual love in the OT
2. Keep in mind the genre: wisdom literature and love poetry common to the OT era and the ancient Near East.
3. Read the Song of Songs as suggesting gold choices rather than merely describing these choices.
4. Be aware that the values of our modern culture are very different from that of the Song of Songs:
 1. Sex techniques vs. romance
 2. Sexual flings vs. lifelong marriage
 3. Selfish pleasure vs. selfless love
 4. Feelings and pleasure vs. a marriage characterized by true romance

Song of Songs Closing Questions:

1. What stands out to you most from this hermeneutical overview of Song of Songs?
2. Why don't you think we hear this book preached much on a Sunday morning in church?
3. What would you say is the value of reading Song of Songs? When could it be helpful?
4. Would you consider its appropriateness limited to certain readers?

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Song of Songs

Song of Songs is a poetic love song about human romance. It is considered wisdom literature because it is associated with Solomon and because it deals with the wise-choices relating to submitting our sexuality to God and his vision for sexual love to be experienced only in a monogamous life-long marriage between a man and a woman. It is helpful when reading Song of Songs to consider the high, Godly view of romance expressed in Song of Songs as opposed to the selfish sexuality so prevalent in our culture today. Sex is a gift from God, and it is to be celebrated and enjoyed as such when submitted to Him and His Word.

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