

Characteristics of Wisdom Literature

Ecclesiastes falls under the category of speculative wisdom, i.e., it is a long monologue exploring the reality in which man finds himself and his relationship to God. Osborne notes that wisdom literature is fundamentally Yahwistic, so in spite of the fact that Ecc 1:3-9 and 5:13-17 paint a bleak, meaningless, and angst-ridden picture of humanity, we may proceed from the perspective that it is nevertheless theistically oriented.

Ecclesiastes 1:3-9 describe a stultifying monotony. In an unending progression, generations come and go (v. 4), the sun rises and sets (v. 5), the winds blow, and the rivers flow (vv. 6-7). This repetition is “wearisome”—as the eye beholds it and the ear listens to it, a profound dissatisfaction is felt (v. 8). The writer summarizes his sentiment aptly: “That which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun” (v. 9). This is what prompts the question of v. 3—since everything in life is monotonous repetition, then there is no hope of innovation or creating something new. Of what benefit is a man’s occupation? Osborne writes that this sort of thinking reflects an aspect of the *creation-theological* nature of wisdom literature (194-195). Ecclesiastes grapples with the issues of evil and suffering in a world created by God. Thus it helps us to understand and trust that God’s justice “transcends human frailty, and our duty is to await his answers” (195). Furthermore, Stuart notes that wisdom literature is not creedal or dogmatic in nature (Fee & Stuart, 217). Statements about ultimate reality are not being

made in Ecc 1:3-9 (at least, not in a formal or direct manner). This is certainly the perspective of Ecc 5:13-17 as well. What gain one receives from his labors can be lost in an instant (vv. 13-15), and the final estate of a man is no different from when he was born (v. 16). What does anyone really have to show for his life's work? Such is life in a world without a Creator.

Proverbs 3:9-10 is typical of wisdom literature in that it is *practically oriented*. It is concerned with how to handle finances properly. The exhortation of these verses is also dependence on God—financial prosperity is a function of honoring Him (Osborne, 193). In form, it is an admonition proverb (196). The positive command (v. 9—honor God with your finances) is followed by a clause that states the motivation for and consequence of obedience (v. 10—so you will experience abundant prosperity).

Proverbs 13:24 exemplifies the terse linguistic nature of a proverb. It is compacted and written in a catchy way to help the reader remember the wisdom it expresses. In fact, this is the verse on which the saying, “Spare the rod, spoil the child,” is based. Note the congruity of syllabic rhythm, the alliterative repetition in “spare” and “spoil”—this is the essence of proverbial language. Since proverbs are not intended to be interpreted as rigid prescriptions for behavior, v. 24 is not necessarily an endorsement of corporal punishment (i.e., spanking). Rather, it states that it is both wise and loving for a parent to include discipline as they raise their children.