

International Conversation Café

Old Testament: Proverbs, the Book of Wisdom

Wisdom literature is found in cultures around the world. Most commonly it consists of short statements or stories that teach people how to revere God and treat others with respect. These sayings were passed down by storytellers and teachers. Eventually, the sayings and stories were written down. In the Old Testament, the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes are all considered wisdom literature.

Give some examples of wise sayings or proverbs from your country of culture.

One must ask, what is wisdom? In Hebrew, the word means skill. It could be a skill to create works of art. For example, artisans were given the skill to create and make decorations in the temple.

The Lord has filled him (Bezalel) with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—³² to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver, and bronze,³³ to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts. Exodus 35:31-33

In other places, the skill mentioned has to do with people. King Solomon knew he needed skill, wisdom to know how to rule and judge his people.

Give me now wisdom and knowledge that I may go out and come in before this people; for who can judge this thy people that is so great? 2 Chronicles 1:10

The book of Proverbs, which was written by Solomon, gives many examples of how wise people behave. It also recommends strengthening the value of getting wisdom over accumulating wealth.

When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes **wisdom**. Proverbs 11:2

Where there is strife, there is pride, but **wisdom** is found in those who take advice. Proverbs 13:10

The **wisdom** of the prudent is to give thought to their ways, but the folly of fools is deception. Proverbs 14:8

A person's **wisdom** yields patience; it is to one's glory to overlook an offense. Proverbs 19:11

According to these verses, summarize how a wise person behaves.

What do you think keeps people from acting wisely, skillfully in relationships with others?

Most recognize the advantage of living wisely. But the big question is where to find wisdom? This question is addressed in the book of the Job, a man who lived in Mesopotamia before Abraham's time.

Where then does wisdom come from?

Where does understanding dwell?

²¹ It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing,
concealed even from the birds in the sky.

And he said to the human race,

“The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom,
and to shun evil is understanding.” Job 28:20-21

The word fear has the idea of respect, awe, and fear. To fear the Lord, it is to recognize that the Lord is someone worthy of our respect, awe, and fear because God is so far above us in power, knowledge, and love. He is the ultimate Judge.

Summarize Job’s conclusions in your own words.

Is there a person on earth you fear because they are over or above you?

How does the respect you give that person affect your behavior with that person or others related to him or her?

How do you think the attitude of respect to God gives us insight to people and skill in our personal relationships?

Solomon asked God for wisdom and God gave him his request.

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. ³⁰ Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. ³² He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. ³³ He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. ³⁴ From all nations, people came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.

1Kings 4:29-34



Edward Poyntes. The Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon. C.1890. Oil on canvas, 2,345 x 3,505 mm. Art Gallery of New South Wales. Sydney, Australia

In what areas of your life do you need wisdom?