

Week 7: OT Genre Studies (continued) – Wisdom and Prophecy

I. *Wisdom*¹

A. Preliminary Remarks

1. Definition

- a. “Wisdom is the ability to make godly choices in life.”²
- b. Wisdom is skill in living according to the order that God has instituted.

2. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Job, and some of the Psalms.

3. In regards to historical background, it is probably *least important* in this genre.

4. Much of the Biblical Wisdom is paralleled in secular literature. However, the central notion of the fear of the Lord (Prov 1:7) makes it unique in the ancient world.

5. It is markedly “secular” in its outlook, emphasizing practical ways of living out God’s law.

B. Specific Rules

1. It is important to understand the different types of wisdom that exist.³

- a. Proverbs – “a concise memorable statement of truth.”
- b. Instruction – This can be a simple exhortation or an extended discourse.
- c. Disputation Speech – A subgenre where the speaker tries to persuade the audience of some truth.

2. It is important to remember that Proverbs are not categorical in nature, and are not trying to communicate universal truth. This means that Proverbs tend to apply with, “all things being equal.”

3. Proverbs are short sayings of truth, and thus (unlike any other genre) generally provide their own context.

1. As regards instruction, one must recognize the weight of the appeal being made. Indeed, the student must approach the wisdom speeches as a woman passionately pleading with passing crowds to follow her advice.⁴

¹ Due to considerations both of time and space, we have decided not to deal with the Psalms, and the broader genre of Biblical poetry. An excellent overview of this genre is contained in *Ibid.*, *Playing With Fire*, 134-173.

² *Ibid.*, *How to Read the Bible*, 206.

³ *Ibid.*, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 387

⁴ *Ibid.*, 391.

Case Example #9: Proverbs 22:6

Parents have long treasured Proverbs 22:6. After all, doesn't it contain the promise that faithful childrearing will always produce faithful children? Unfortunately, it does not. We must remember that proverbs state general truths that apply, "all things being equal." But things are not always equal, and often children stray in this fallen world, even when reared by the most holy and diligent parents imaginable. One can save him or herself from a great deal of grief by understanding that proverbs state general truths that don't necessarily apply in every scenario.

II. Prophecy

A. Preliminary Remarks

1. Definition

- a. Individuals sent to call Israel back to covenant faithfulness both through *forthtelling* (primary) and *foretelling* (secondary).
 - b. Prophet – "a messenger from God sent to call the people back to their covenant relationship with Yahweh."⁵
2. More books of the Bible (17) fall into this genre than any other.⁶
 3. It is *vitaly important* to understand cultural background when reading the prophets, for only with this prior information can the specific indictments/exhortations of the author be understood.
 4. While we typically think of the prophets as predictors of the future. This was in no way their primary role. Instead, they generally preached a message Israel had heard many times before (i.e. return to covenant faithfulness).⁷ Thus, their primary purpose was *forthtelling*, and of far lesser importance was their *foretelling* of the future.

B. Specific Rules

1. As with the aforementioned genres, there are a number of subgenres that one must be wary of.⁸ Here are a few noteworthy subgenres:
 - a. Prophecy of Disaster – an announcement of imminent of future disaster either to an individual or to an entire nation.

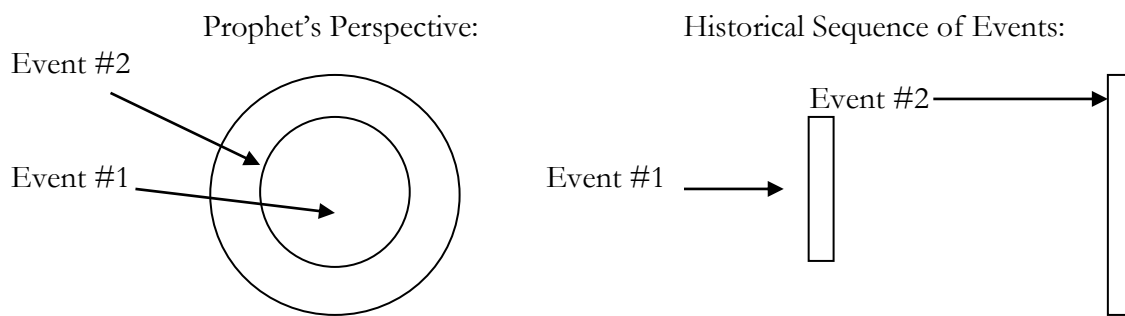
⁵ Ibid., *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 206.

⁶ Ibid., *How to Read the Bible*, 165.

⁷ Ibid., *Playing With Fire*, 177.

⁸ Ibid., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 359-370.

- b. Prophecy of Salvation – this prophecy resembles prophecies of disaster, but the content is positive rather than negative.
 - c. Prophetic Dirge – a dirge or funeral lament over the nation of Israel.
 - d. Prophetic Disputation – a conversation where the speaker tries to persuade the audience to accept the validity of some truth.
2. When it comes to prophecy, think *oracles* (i.e. the prophetic unit of thought).⁹ This can only be done when one has an awareness of the aforementioned subgenres.
3. A Few Notes on Foretelling:
- a. The following diagram¹⁰ shows the prophet's perspective on history, as compared with the actual chronology of events:



b. The above diagram shows that while the Prophets might see God's actions in history as immediately following one another, the actual working out of those events in history may take place over a considerably longer amount of time. This has a number of implications for how one interprets predictions of the future:

- i. The OT prophets understood two ages; the present age and the age to come. Thus, from there perspective, there is an immediacy to their message because they believe God's intervention is imminent.¹¹
- ii. OT prophecy may have two fulfillments; one around the prophet's lifetime, and one long past it.¹²

⁹ Ibid., *How to Read the Bible*, 177.

¹⁰ Ibid., 182.

¹¹ Ibid., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 376.

¹² Ibid., 377.

- iii. In many cases, OT prophecies concerning Israel find their fulfillment in Christ.¹³
- iv. Other OT prophecies remain unfulfilled.¹⁴
- v. Overall, be careful to distinguish the between the *message* of the prophecy and the *fulfillment* of the prophecy.¹⁵

III. Case Example:

Case Example #10: Jeremiah 29:11

Many have taken this as a wonderful promise for the Christian. Some have even used it in gospel invitations, assuring listeners with this verse that, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” However, if we remember that the majority of the prophets’ message is *forthtelling* and not *foretelling*, it becomes clear that using these passages in this manner is a grievous error. A few questions should make this clear:

- What situation is Jeremiah addressing?
- What audience is he writing to?
- Who does the “you” refer to in 29:11?

Answering a simple list of contextual questions like this makes clear that the popular interpretation of this verse is ultimately a *misinterpretation* of the authorial intent.

¹³ Ibid., 383.

¹⁴ Ibid., 381.

¹⁵ Ibid., *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 413.