

Literary Genre: Proverbs and Wisdom

Literary genre is a category of written works. Recognizing the type of writing prepares one for how to read and observe the text. Some literature can be considered as being a couple categories. For example, Hebrew proverbs and wisdom literature are all poetic. Poetry can teach wisdom in a concise and compressed language and in a memorable form.

There are two types of biblical wisdom: practical and speculative. Practical wisdom refers to guidelines that will lead to a holy and happy life. Speculative wisdom refers to the deeper issues such as the meaning of life and the existence of evil.

Proverbs and wisdom literature can be found in Bible books such as Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.

Wisdom literature may be a bit more challenging to understand. Not only does one need to recognize the form of Hebrew poetry, but having a grasp of literary devices is required to perceive the wisdom of the passage. Here are some of the common types of figures of speech seen in the Bible's wisdom literature:

1. Personification. This literary device attributes human characteristics to something that is inanimate or an abstract concept. By doing so, the non-human subject becomes more memorable.

Wisdom shouts in the street,
She gives forth her voice in the square;
At the head of the noisy streets she calls out;
At the entrance of the gates in the city she utters her sayings:
“How long, O simple ones, will you love simplicity?
And scoffers delight in scoffing
And fools hate knowledge?” (Prov 1:20-22, LSB)

2. Metaphor. This figure of speech makes a comparison by stating something “**is**” something else. The description isn't literally true but it helps explain something is similar to something else in a colorful way. It differs from similes in that the comparison is saying that something can **replace** something else.

As a ring of gold in a swine's snout
So is a beautiful woman who turns away from discretion. (Prov 11:22, LSB)

As the door turns on its hinges,
So does the sluggard on his bed. (Prov 26:14, LSB)

3. Simile. This figure of speech makes a comparison by stating something “**as**” or “**like**” something else. It highlights the similarities of two things. It differs from metaphors in that the comparison is saying something is only **similar** to something else.

Like vinegar to the teeth and like smoke to the eyes,
So is the sluggard to those who send him. (Prov 10:26, LSB)

Like apples of gold in settings of silver
Is a word spoken in right circumstances.
Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold
Is a wise reprove to a listening ear. (Prov 25:11-12, LSB)

I resemble a pelican of the wilderness;
I have become like an owl of the waste places.
I lie awake,
I have become like a lonely bird on a roof. (Ps 102:6-7, LSB)

How should you read Proverbs and wisdom literature?

Read poetry slowly in short sections and enjoy the literary beauty of God's word.

Study the figures of speech such as personification, metaphor and simile. Carefully observe what is being said and compared.

Look for the behavior and their consequences and learn from them.

To know wisdom and discipline,
To understand the sayings of understanding,

To receive discipline that leads to insight,
Righteousness, justice, and equity,

To give prudence to the simple,
To the youth knowledge and discretion;

Let the wise man hear and increase in learning,
And a man of understanding will acquire guidance,

To understand a proverb and an enigma,
The words of the wise and their riddles.

The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge;
Ignorant fools despise wisdom and discipline. (Prov 1:2-7, LSB)

Literary Genre: Proverbs and Wisdom Teacher Notes

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Wisdom literature may be a bit more challenging to understand. Not only does one need to recognize the form of Hebrew poetry, but having a grasp of literary devices is required to perceive the wisdom of the passage. Here are some of the common types of figures of speech seen in the Bible's wisdom literature:

Help the student see that the visual comparison of the figure of speech may provide a tangible comparison. The best way to do so is to ask questions that will help the student, see, hear, feel, and taste the comparison.

1. Personification. This literary device attributes human characteristics to something that is inanimate or an abstract concept. By doing so, the non-human subject becomes more memorable.

Wisdom shouts in the street,
She gives forth her voice in the square;
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"How long, O simple ones, will you love simplicity?
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And fools hate knowledge?" (Prov 1:20-22, LSB)

How is wisdom seen as a person? Wisdom shouts and calls out above the noisy streets! Wisdom is seen in the town square, in the beginning of the noisy street, and the entrance of the city – everywhere that can be visibly seen!

What does God say about biblical wisdom? Wisdom is available to **those who seek and listen** for God's word.

2. Metaphor. This figure of speech makes a comparison by stating something "is" something else. The description isn't literally true but it helps explain something is similar to something else in a colorful way. It differs from similes in that the comparison is saying that something can **replace** something else.

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Whenever you read the Bible, observe the text carefully from the perspective of the people receiving God's word. Take for example pigs. How does the nation of Israel consider pigs? Pigs are banned from consumption and considered unclean, because they have cloven feet and do not chew a cud (Lev 11:7-8, 26-28; Deut 14:8); pigs are undesirable.

The phrase "as a ring of gold in a swine's snout" refers to something precious (gold) that is unappreciated by something undesirable (swine). This phrase describes an outwardly beautiful woman who does not use good judgment and behaves foolishly rendering her "unclean" and "undesirable."

As the door turns on its hinges,
So does the sluggard on his bed. (Prov 26:14, LSB)

What is being compared here? What is a sluggard? Does the figure of speech help make this amusing and memorable?

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How does this simile help you feel this comparison? Do you taste the acidic sourness of vinegar? Do you feel the eye watering sting of smoke in your eyes? Do you feel the dismay of the person receiving help from the lazy person who is unwilling or does not care to help. Do you ever want to display the attitude of the sluggard?

Like apples of gold in settings of silver
Is a word spoken in right circumstances.
Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold
Is a wise reprove to a listening ear. (Prov 25:11-12, LSB)

Is this simile speaking of one person or two? Did you notice that there is the speaker (wise reprove) and the listener? What is a reprove?

“Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word **spoken in right circumstances.**”

The person who brings up the fault or error of another is **wise when** the criticism is constructive with the intent to genuinely help and spoken only under the right circumstances. Such well-spoken advice is received as precious “apples of gold in settings of silver.”

“Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold is a wise reprove to **a listening ear.**”

What is God saying about the listening ear? What attitude is behind a listening ear? What is this proverb encouraging people to do?

I resemble a pelican of the wilderness;
I have become like an owl of the waste places.
I lie awake,
I have become like a lonely bird on a roof. (Ps 102:6-7, LSB)

In this prayer to God, what is the speaker being compared to? In comparing himself to solitary birds, the speaker places an emphasis on being alone while praying to God.

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The Class Lesson for this Teacher Note is at:
<http://Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/25Curriculum/Class6-8/Bible.LitGenre.Poetry.6-8.aspx>