

# Ecclesiastes: Reading Wisdom Literature

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The Bible contains history, law, narrative, memoir, epistles, prophecy, poetry, gospels, and wisdom literature. Each genre contributes to the central theme of the Bible in unique ways, revealing different layers of meaning around who God is and what he is doing in the world.

Ecclesiastes falls into the biblical genre of wisdom literature. In general, wisdom literature examines the nature of the world we live in and asks the question—how do we live well here in light of eternity? The author of Ecclesiastes explores the meaning of life, examining both the foolish and wise ways we can use our short time on earth.

Here are six facets of wisdom literature that are helpful to consider when studying Ecclesiastes:

1. **Wisdom literature contains proverbs**—Proverbs are short pithy sayings conveying a general truth or piece of advice. We must remember that a proverb is not a promise. They represent general principles to which there are always exceptions.
2. **Wisdom literature uses poetic devices**—The author is often creating a mood for us to contemplate or respond to, so he uses literary devices like imagery, metaphor, simile, or personification. These devices are not always intended to dictate theology but to evoke a feeling in the reader.
3. **Wisdom literature sometimes focuses on anti-wisdom**—When an author highlights the foolishness of man, he is pointing us towards the consequences of sin. We often see the characteristics and choices of the wise and the foolish discussed side by side as they are compared and contrasted.
4. **Wisdom literature should be considered holistically**—We should always be careful not to take any part of Scripture out of context. However, the books of wisdom literature in particular need to be read and contemplated in full as they contain big ideas that must be held in tension with one another.
5. **Wisdom literature reveals the character of God**—While it is not always a story that refers directly to God, wisdom literature illuminates his desires and priorities. As these books explore the confusing nature of the world, they consistently point us towards God, who is both the creator of that which is beautiful and the solution to that which is broken.
6. **Wisdom literature calls us to embrace tension**—Do not approach challenging aspects of Ecclesiastes (or any part of the Bible) as problems to solve. The author is calling us to contemplate the meaning of life and sit in the tension. This tension drives us to humble ourselves and live out our lives in faith, submitting to the greater wisdom of our Creator.

